

“Here Am I, the Servant of the Lord”

Scripture: Luke 1:26-38

William C. Pender

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Former Secretary General of the United Nations, Dag Hammarskjold, said: “God does not die on the day when we cease to believe in a personal deity, but we die on the day when our lives cease to be illumined by the steady radiance, renewed daily, of a wonder, the source of which is beyond all reason.” If you came today because this is a good day to be in worship, you are exactly right. If you came today to get a reasonable explanation of why you went to the trouble to get here, I don’t think I can help you very much. To gather around the story of birth of Jesus is to gather around the story that sails right past reason and reasonableness and ends up at awe, mystery, and captivation—we become captive to a story, a purpose; a vision that is finally crazy—divinely crazy.

Madeline L’Engle has this poem about the Christmas season:

*This is the irrational season
When love blooms bright and wild;
Had Mary been filled with reason,
There’d have been no room for the child.*

Had Mary been filled with reason, there would be no room for the child. Listen now to part of that story that is central to this “irrational season.”

Luke 1:26-38: ²⁶In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. ²⁸And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” ²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” ³⁴Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” ³⁵The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God.” ³⁸Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.

What a mystery story! This story invites all sorts of questions about what really happened. What did the angel look like? Why don’t we see angels today? How did the conception really

Here am I 12-18-05

take place? We do know something about the “birds and the bees” after all. How old was Mary? Did she really wear blue? And not a single one of those questions are answered. We just have the story—a mystery story.

Out of the billions of teenage girls that have ever been, God chooses a young girl from a backwards town of Nazareth in a second-rate kingdom where the people, when not rebelling against outside authorities, tended to kill each other (sounds like Iraq today, doesn't it?). And there, God chooses to work the most incredible miracle: a human child in every way and wrapped up in the very nature of God. So wrapped up in the nature of God that we do not ask what God is like...we ask what Christ is like, and then we know what God is like.

Here's the central focus of the story: God chooses Mary. God's choice is told in the language and spirit of the day: the angel Gabriel goes to her. We don't know what Gabriel looked like. Only one other book of the Bible mentions Gabriel—that's the book of Daniel. And there all we find out is that Gabriel's role is that of revealing what is to come. However, the angel language of the Bible is simply a way to express the work of God. Most appearances of angels do not include names. Biblical references to the “angel of the Lord” are just another way to say the “hand of God.”

So Gabriel's visitation with Mary means that God chooses Mary. You may know that bumper sticker that reads, “Wise men still seek him.” That's another story—people who will go to such efforts to search and then to give valuable gifts. But Mary does not appear to have been seeking God in order to have a baby. There is absolutely no hint of any effort on her part to bring about this conversation with the angel. God just chooses her.

God chooses Mary...and there is absolutely no explanation as to why except to say that is the way God wanted it. But if that is the way that God wanted it, how about Mary? What did she want?

What did Mary want? The writer Fredrich Buechner has a wonderful description of the angel Gabriel that points toward the mystery of Mary's choice. In a bit of holy imagination, Buechner considers this scene from the point of view of Gabriel. He writes of Gabriel:

She struck the angel Gabriel as hardly old enough to have a child at all, let alone this child, but he'd been entrusted with a message to give her, and he gave it. He told her what the child was to be named, and who he was to be, and something about the mystery that was to come upon her. “You mustn't be afraid, Mary,” he said. As he said it, he only hoped she wouldn't notice that beneath the great, golden wings he himself was trembling with fear to think that the whole future of creation hung now on the answer of a girl.¹

Now that's bit of sanctified imagination—that Gabriel might be trembling with fear. But

1 Frederick Buechner's description of Gabriel, *Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who's Who*.

consider how the mystery deepens here. We know what God is choosing to do...what about Mary's choice. Some would say she did not have any choice at all. Think about it—the angel Gabriel appears to you and says, “This is what God wants to do.” Could you say, “No?” Could you ignore the angel? Aren't there some people in your life to whom you cannot say, “No?” In the British comedy series about the old lawyer Rumpole, you may recall how he referred to his wife. When Rumpole spoke of his wife, he referred to her as “She who must be obeyed.”

Does Mary really have a choice? You and I do...so why not her? She has a choice to accept or reject, to live the choice or live the non-choice. And Mary is not being asked, “Do you believe in God?” There is nothing simple about her believing. If she accepts, she is going to have baby. Her acceptance means to embody her faith. Nothing is said about the risk to her reputation, about how some people will react, or even about the way of her fiancé might react. Think of anguish of trying to tell her fiancé Joseph: “This is not your child...and no, there is no other man in my life...the baby come from God.”

And pregnancy itself is no picnic. I will readily admit that I know this as an observer not as one who has lived it. Then there would be childbirth without any anesthesia—again, as an observer, I'm a big fan of epidurals! Then there is the anguish and worry that will always be part of Mary's life—she will be a parent. I guess there are some for whom parenthood is limited-term engagement but I don't know many for whom that is true. Mary is being asked to embody her acceptance. Not just for that moment...but for the rest of her life.

Embody her faith? If God's choice is mysterious...Mary's answer is even more mysterious. Does she say, “Let me check my calendar?” Does she say, “This is just not my thing to do...it is not my gift?” Does she say, “God only get sixty minutes each Sunday—and that's provided I am not too tired and feel like coming?” Does she say, “I suppose you will want me to fill out pledge card and keep it?”

Mary says: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word.” That “word” is that things are going to be tough but absolutely all right. What would it be like if we met the angelic messages that are coming our way with those words, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord?” And, remember angelic words are not reasonable and they cause trouble in our lives. Angelic words are mysteries that we can either ignore or accept.

Consider some the possible situations that you will face in the days ahead—situations that are unreasonable and cause trouble.²

The next few days are going to be ones of celebration. They are also going to be filled with stress. What a great time to say, every morning, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord.” Can you say that with me? “Here am I, the servant of the Lord.”

² The next section is dependent on idea from a UCC minister, Kirk Moore, cited in *Homiletics*, http://www.homileticsonline.com/subscriber/btl_display.asp?installment_id=93000108

How about when you are traveling to visit relatives, and the kids are in the back seat bickering with each other about who has the most room? What a great time to say, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord.”

Very late Christmas Eve, when all the presents aren’t yet wrapped, and the “some assembly required” gift come in a bag filled with 200 pieces, what a great time to say, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord.”

Back at work, when your boss or your employees are cutting corners, and you are feeling pressure to behave unethically, what a great time to say, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord.”

Back at school, when others make fun of you because you don’t go along or someone pushes you to do something you don’t believe in, what a great time to say, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord.”

Out in the community, when people show disregard for the homeless, or disdain for immigrants, or distrust toward people of different beliefs, what a great time to say, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord.”

You can say it out of habit. You can say it for comfort. You can say it as a way to enter into a connection with God. You can say it as a prayer to help you do the things that you know God wants you to do. Any time can be a great time to say, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord”.

When we say these words, we are offering ourselves up to the mystery that Christ will be born in us. It is not so much that God will be on our side, but rather our choosing to be on God’s side...to be open, receptive and faithful to the promises and the priorities of God.

I don’t know who the first to say it was, but the oddity of the saying has always captured my attention. Do you know what the organ of conception for Mary was? Physically speaking, it was not her womb. No, the organ of conception was her ear. She heard the call of God and she said, “Let it be with me according to your word.” The ear is the organ of conception.

A French philosopher, Blaise Pascal, once observed: “In faith there is enough light for those who want to believe and enough shadows to blind those who don’t.” Let me paraphrase Pascal: in this story there is enough word for those want to be faithful and enough nonsense for those who don’t. We have ears—we have the organ of conception. And we have Mary’s choice. What will it be? Let it be to me according to what I want...or let it be with me according to your word.

Mary said: “Here am I, the servant of Lord.” If you have ears to hear, then repeat it with me again: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord.”