

The God Who Is Born  
Isaiah 9:2-7  
Luke 1:26-38

“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given....”

On this fourth Sunday in Advent that is also Christmas Eve, I am wrestling as never before with Luke’s story of the Annunciation. This began on Tuesday at our rehearsal for the service of Lessons and Carols tonight when I found myself paying attention to Mary in a wholly different way. Unasked and unannounced, the angel Gabriel appears in what is usually imagined to be Mary’s bedroom. He tells this 12, maybe 13 year old girl not to be afraid. He flatters her. You could say, he grooms her. “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” Mary is perplexed. Or as the King James Version translates her response: Mary was “troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be.” She is anxious, distrustful, overwhelmed by a powerful, uninvited presence in her bedroom.

Then Gabriel tells her, in the language of the Old Testament prophets, that her virgin self is going to conceive a son in her womb who will be given the throne of his father David. Mary surely knows the law and the prophets, knows what Gabriel is announcing theologically. Perhaps the prophetic ring of Gabriel’s words begin to calm her down. But Mary also knows how babies are made. “How can this be,” she asks, “since I know not a man?” What must she undergo in response to Gabriel’s announcement? What is about to happen to her in her bedroom with an uninvited stranger? Gabriel then explains, in the language of the New Testament, that “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow you; therefore that holy thing which shall be born [of you] will called the Son of God.” Just here, while we were practicing, I said, right into this microphone, mostly to be funny, “And Mary said, #MeToo.” The three of us laughed and I returned to the script.

But I cannot simply return to the script this year. Something about this moment in the life of the God who is born and this moment in our common life has caused me to pay particular attention to the revelation of God’s power and human vulnerability in Luke’s narrative of Jesus’ conception, a power and vulnerability that love’s incarnation will transform by the time Luke narrates Jesus’ crucifixion and death.

In an article written fifteen years before Time Magazine named the Silence Breakers or the #MeToo Movement the person of the year, John Stendahl shared his theological discomfort with “the themes of power and consent in this story of our salvation.” Stendahl acknowledges that even though Luke’s Gospel is known for its attention to women, his portrayal of women majors in their piety and filial obedience. “The banter and hard questioning we hear from women in the other Gospels is hardly prominent, if even present, in Luke’s imagining,” he writes. “His Mary can seem a paragon of compliance.” Maybe this is because, as many church fathers have opined, Mary’s assent must redeem Eve’s disobedience. “Not in self-assertion but in abnegation and subordination... womanhood, or the soul of all our humanity, will be redeemed.” Hence Justin Martyr “contrasted the virginity and obedience of Mary with the virginity and disobedience of Eve.” Irenaeus held that Eve was “the cause of death for herself and the whole human race” while Mary became “the cause of salvation both for herself and the whole human race.”

But still, Stendahl says, we cannot ignore the dynamic of power and submission in Luke’s story of the annunciation. Gabriel does not “come in unto Mary” with a proposal but with the announcement of “an exercise of irresistible power: ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.’ Our piety may protect us from seeing an analogy here with the rape of Io, mighty Zeus covering a woman in the shape of a dark cloud, but even without such blasphemous association,” Stendahl insists, “the suggestion of patriarchal violence lurks in the story’s shadows.”

What began on Tuesday as a funny remark in rehearsal had left me, by week’s end, a bit shaken. For certainly, I thought, Mary must give her consent, a consent that is lauded as obedience and submission. But it is not by chance that the sense of compulsion in Mary’s consent is removed in every translation. New Testament scholar Beverly Gaventa (Matt’s mother), notes that the word variously rendered as “handmaid” and “servant” actually means slave: “Behold the slave of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word.” “Mary recognizes

with this statement God's selection of her and the compulsion under which her role is to be played." Therefore to "translate 'servant' is to misconstrue Mary's role as that of one who has *chosen* to serve rather than one who has *been chosen*." Men also will be chosen. Paul will speak of himself as a "slave of the Lord." Jesus will say, "Whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all." Still the power differential between God's choosing and Mary's consent makes Mary's refusal unlikely unless the power of the God who chooses her is not the power of an omnipotent, omnipresent, impassible, implacable God, but the power of love born into our human vulnerability.

So here is the real blasphemy that began to occupy my head and heart this week. I know the gospel of Christmas is the gospel of God with us and for us. But what if the gospel of Christmas is also good news in the life of God? What if the incarnation, God's choice to assume our human being as God's own, is, as Robert Jenson once exclaimed on a page, God's working out of God's identity for himself? What if the irresistible power of the God who came in unto Mary and overshadowed her also was transformed by love in God's assumption of our fearful vulnerability to death? Now Jesus' consent to his death in the garden, "...yet not my will but yours be done" assumes Mary's consent to Jesus' birth at his conception, "Be it unto me according to thy word." Something happened in the life of the God who was born. In God's assumption of human vulnerability—the vulnerability Mary knew in the presence of God's irresistible power—God is working out God's identity not as the omnipotent, omnipresent, impassible, incomprehensible, unchangeable being but as the love whose power is made perfect in weakness.

Robert Jenson says it better when he writes: "If God's only Son, true God from true God and all the rest of it, becomes and is incarnate *for* us, this says that creaturely circumstances are the occasion of an event in the life of God...are involved in what it means for God to be God." That is to say, creaturely circumstances become part of the inner life of the God who is born—meaning fear and joy, meaning hunger and a meal with friends, meaning pain and rejection and the solace of another human being, meaning heart ache and homesickness and hope, meaning birth and death.

But Jenson says more. "As I struggle through time toward my own identity," he writes, "I do so in my words and acts for and with others. My search for identity is a repeated declaration to others who I am toward them. But just so I find who I am for myself. We must say the same about God, if [God] is love, and therefore finds himself in what he gives us." God becomes an event our lives and becomes himself as God gives himself completely to us in a virgin's womb, in the blood and mucus of birth, in the hidden adventures and missteps of childhood, in the awkward season of adolescence, in various temptations to become who he is not in the wilderness, in his coming out at his hometown synagogue, his arguments with priests and petty politicians, in the companionship and betrayal of friends, in the wounds, the whoops, the hunger, the fear, the hopes of every child of God, and in the rejection, the derision, the hatred, the violence and the death he knew, God gives us himself completely and God finds himself. God who is the love that is love that is love that is love that is love finds himself in the vulnerable body he consents to give to us.

Tonight, at the tail end of Advent, you and I will be alone together, in this room, in the darkness, perplexed and troubled by the address of an uninvited, unasked for holy presence, sent to tell us that the God who is born has chosen to be born in us. Unlike Mary, because he was born for us and because he died for us two thousand years ago, we are no longer slaves but brothers and sisters of him who first loved us by giving himself to us completely. And, unlike Mary, because God has found himself in the love that is the power of weakness, we really may consent to be Godbearers or not, to give birth to the love that finds itself by giving itself away completely or not, to love one another as we have been loved by the God who is born or not.

"Aren't there annunciations/of one sort of another in most lives?" Denise Levertov asks.

Some unwillingly  
undertake great destinies,  
enact them in sullen pride,  
uncomprehending.

More often  
those moments

when roads of light and storm  
open from darkness in a man or a woman,  
are turned away from

in dread, in a wave of weakness, in despair  
and with relief.

Ordinary lives continue.

God does not smite them.

But the gates close, the pathway vanishes.

She had been a child who played, ate, spelt  
like any other child—but unlike others,  
wept only for pity, laughed  
in joy, not triumph.

Compassion and intelligence  
fused in her, indivisible.

Call to a destiny more momentous  
than any in all Time,  
she did not quail,

only asked  
a simple, “How can this be?”  
and gravely, courteously,  
took to heart the angel’s reply,

Thanks be to God for the God who is born. Amen.

perceived instantly  
the astounding ministry she was offered:

to bear in her womb  
Infinite weight and lightness; to carry  
in hidden, finite inwardness,  
nine months of Eternity; to contain  
in slender vase of being,  
the sum of power—  
in narrow flesh  
the sum of light.

Then bring to birth,  
push out into air, a Man-child  
needing, like any other  
milk and love—

but who was God.