

Tumbling into Mortality

Genesis 3:8-15

Luke 1:26-35, 38

In the beginning Eve and in the fullness of time Mary: two women who are not only necessary but critical to the story of our salvation. But in what way? Barely a hundred years after Jesus' birth, the earliest Church Fathers began to speak of Mary as the New Eve; by the fourth century, as church councils were wrestling with the human and divine nature of Jesus, Eve had fallen even further into sin while Mary had been raised to new heights of grace. To wit, John Chrysostom declared in a sermon on Christ's birth:

Of old the devil deceived Eve, who was a virgin; for this reason Gabriel brought good tidings to Mary, who was a virgin. But when Eve was deceived, she brought forth a word that was the cause of death; when the glad tidings were brought to Mary, she gave birth in flesh to the Word, the author for us of life eternal. Eve's word made known the wood (the tree), through which it cast Adam from paradise; but the Word from the Virgin made known the cross, through which he brought the robber into paradise in place of Adam.

Tidy as the comparison is, I think the theological caricature of both leads us to miss the recognizable human condition in each, the condition that God assumed and the condition that God redeemed in Jesus Christ.

My favorite rereading of Eve comes from the pen of the late Barbara Grizzuti Harrison. You have heard it before from this pulpit. "When Eve bit into the apple," she writes,

...she gave us the world as we know the world—beautiful, flawed, dangerous, full of being. She gave us smallpox and Somalia, polio vaccine and wheat and Windsor roses....She (not Mary) is the mother of my children, born in travail to a world of suffering their presence may refresh....Even the alienation from God we feel as a direct consequence of her Fall makes me beholden to her. The intense desire for God, never satisfied, arises from our separation from [God]....

In Eve we meet a woman who thinks and reasons and chooses and risks as we do every day of our lives. She knows the one prohibition, and takes it to be God's word on the authority of the man; but when a contrary word is uttered, "You shall not die..." for a split second, I imagine Eve seeing the world through the eyes of possibility rather than prohibition. It is as though she is in the first garden, the garden where everything God created is good, very good! And in that split second that never was, before Eve tumbles into mortality, I imagine her to be the precursor of our questions rather than our certitude, our curiosity rather than our conformity, our delight before the dread of death sets in.

But then the fear and anxiety borne of tumbling into mortality begins to knit caution, timidity, submission, and insecurity into the fabric of her human being. When we meet Eve this morning, we encounter her on the way to the world as we have ordered it. It is a world (in the words of church historian J.A. Ross Mackenzie) tyrannized by death. "Death," Mackenzie writes, "has come upon the human race; and because we know we are confronted by this enemy, we shall attempt in all the vanity of our power, to change our situation of helplessness and finitude. We shall therefore live for ourselves and protect our life against those who threaten it." God's words to Eve are merely descriptive of life lived East of Eden, of the life we live, even now, under the dominion of death and at a distance from the One who is the source of life.

Yet Eve insinuates upon our fearful mortality the distance absolutely necessary if we are to be children not of some mindless religious submission, but of the God who, in freedom, once for all, quit the distance we keep—the same God who, all the while, guards our freedom to cut and run.

Contrary to Lorenzo Lotto's *Annunciation*, Mary does not cut and run, prompting two thousand years of theologians to hallow her for her submission and obedience. But I repeat: the hallowing has caused us to miss the human condition of Mary that God assumed and Christ redeemed. Initially I thought a Professor of Classics in Steubenville, Ohio was onto Mary's humanity. Sarah Wear's grammatical analysis of Mary's words led her to conclude that Mary did not submit or concede but, in a radical and wild move, wished God to do this to her. Mary's response, she says, "to something divinely terrifying is to hope for it." She says not "be it unto me" but "let it be done to me" or, as we might say, bring it on! I was with Sarah until she concluded that Mary's bold

wishing rather than her meek submission is the difference between a normal, harried mother of seven and a saint; Sarah still ends up wishing she were as good as Mary.

So as regards Mary's humanity, I am beholden to two members of this church. First, Blair Thornburgh who was "gobshocked" when she realized that Henry Ossawa Tanner "consciously chose" to make the Mary in his *Annunciation* young. "She is not 'the porcelain Mary of the Old Masters,'" Blair writes, "but a frightened, humbled teenage girl" who knows "ambivalence and fear and occasional self-loathing. [Knows the timidity borne of tumbling into mortality?] But underneath it all, even faintly, [who feels] a strange kind of power...that if push came to shove, [she] could be capable of amazing things." "Tanner wants us to see this teenage Mary," Blair says. "He wanted us to confront the reality that *this is the way the Savior will enter the world*—not through a matriarch past childbearing age, like Sarah or Mary's own cousin Elizabeth, and not through some superhumanly serene young woman, but through an unsure, even doubtful, teenage girl."

Second, I am gobshocked every time I walk into my living room and behold the utter astonishment and disbelief on the face of Laura Pritchard's Mary, her halo huge and heavy, the shadows both of Gabriel's wing seen flying away and Mary's arms angled, her hands planted firmly on her waist. It would be as if, one day, someone should whisper life-changing, earth-shattering news in your ear and then fly away, leaving you shattered and alone--unless the news should be that God is about to tumble into mortality, our mortality, that we are the bearer of God's Word for the sake of the world, because we are, we all are.

Finally, I did not know the world then, but I was gobshocked when, after staring for hours at Fra Angelico's *Annunciation* at the top of the stairs in San Marco Cloisters, I realized that Mary was dressed in Dominican garb. According to this community of 14th century men, Mary is a preacher--*the* preacher--one whose vocation is hearing. She hears God's Word and models for these preachers the vocation of one who bears God's word to the world. Mary has done nothing and everything. She says to generations who have passed by the fresco "*Ecce*: Behold." Every Sunday morning, the same Word is spoken and heard, read and proclaimed and waiting to be born in us.

Underneath our Sunday best, we are Eve's offspring—"the mingling, melding, braiding of good and mischief." On any given day of the week, most of us are no less frightened than a teenage girl, ambivalent and occasionally self-loathing, our hands on our hips as if to say, "You must be kidding!" But we are also like Mary dressed in a preacher's robe: we do nothing and everything. We hear God's address and manage to say only *Ecce*, then wait until the God's Word made flesh tumbles into mortality to assume the questions and curiosity and wonder and ambivalence and fear that will make him truly human, that will make him our Redeemer. On this third week in Advent, I know only enough to say: OMG! Are you kidding? Bring it on! Come, O Come Emmanuel!