

We are all, like Mary, God-bearers

Luke 1:26-38 & 46b-55

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4th Sunday of Advent



A few minutes ago, we lit the fourth candle of Advent, proclaiming that this candle is for all God-bearers, saying “yes” to God’s challenge, accepting the pain and joy of an unknown future. So today we reflect on what it means to be a God-bearer, what it means to say “yes” to God when we are confused and full of questions, when we cannot even begin to imagine what God has in mind. The focus of our meditation is our Gospel lesson in which

the angel Gabriel announces to Mary that she is to conceive and give birth to the Son of God.

As a preface to our reflection on this text: Luke was not writing history, nor was he writing science. To get bogged down in the question, “did this really happen?” is to miss the point. Luke was writing theology, telling the story of who God is, how God relates to human beings, and how human beings respond to God. In Luke’s story, Mary is *the* model and example of discipleship, the person who all people men and women are called to emulate. She is the most Christ-like person in the entire Gospel. The early church gave her a special title — *theotokos* — God-bearer signifying that the child she gave birth to was not just a man, but God made flesh, God become human and physical, visible and tangible. So the question we ponder today: what do we learn about being a God-bearer from Mary’s encounter with the angel Gabriel?

To help us answer that question it is helpful to remember who Mary was — a young girl probably no more than fourteen or fifteen years of age. She was betrothed which meant that she was in a post-engagement-pre-wedding-pre-moving-in-with-husband state of being. Mary’s betrothed was a man named Joseph who came from an illustrious family that had fallen on hard times. A descendant of King David, he made his living as a carpenter or builder in Bethlehem.

Mary’s hometown of Nazareth was a small Jewish settlement with no more than two to four hundred inhabitants. They lived and worked in simple dwellings often built into or around hillside caves. The evidence of their daily lives is found in the olive and wine presses, water cisterns, grain silos, and grinding stones uncovered by archaeologists.¹ Mary and her people were not just common and ordinary, they were economically and socially impoverished folk who were of little or no account in their world. And she knew it.

¹ John Dominic Cross & Jonathan L. Reed, *Excavating Jesus - Beneath the Stones, Behind the Texts: The Key Discoveries for Understanding Jesus in His World*, Harper San Francisco 2001, pp. 31-32.

Mary, like many other poor people in the world then and now, grew up hearing and believing things such as: God makes some people are rich and powerful and others are poor and powerless — that's just the way it is. Poor people are poor because they are lazy and/or stupid. Poor people deserve to be poor because they did something wrong in a previous life and this life is payback time. If poor people suffer their poverty bravely and gladly they will be rewarded in the age to come.

It is no surprise then, that Mary is perplexed — surprised and confused when the angel greets her as a recipient of God's grace and favor, of God's presence and power. I can imagine her responding with someone like, "What? Are you talking to me? God is here? In this place where we live in caves, work from sunrise to sundown, and just manage to stay one step ahead of starvation?" Her confusion increases when the angel informs her that *now* she will conceive and give birth to a son who will be called the Son of the Most High. "How can this be? How can I conceive *now*, I've never been with a man? We're in the middle of planning the wedding!" The angel answers that this will all be the work of the Holy Spirit, who has already empowered her relative Elizabeth to conceive in her old age. He reminds Mary that with God nothing is impossible. We might well wonder whether Mary's response really represents an informed consent, a trusting commitment, or just an acceptance of things she has no control over.

So what do we learn about God-bearers from Mary the mother of Jesus and her encounter with the angel Gabriel?

We learn that a person needs no special credentials to be a God-bearer. Mary doesn't do anything to get God's attention. She is just a young girl going on with her life in her little corner of the world. She doesn't seek God. God seeks her in order to do something marvelous through her that will benefit the whole world. From Mary's story we learn that God's grace and favor are directed toward ordinary, everyday, common people, even people who are regarded as of little or no account, even people who are convinced that God could not possibly care about them because hardly anyone else in the world seems to. Human poverty — economic, social, intellectual and/or spiritual — do not disqualify a person from being a God-bearer.

We see that Mary's response to God's active presence and interest in her life is surprise and confusion. She is perplexed and fearful. What the angel says doesn't make sense. She asks questions. How many of us truly believe that God is active and present, personally interested in our lives? If we could get past our modern skepticism, and accept that God is present and active in our lives sometimes in strange and mysterious ways, we would still be left asking lots of questions, wondering "Really, God? You want me to do what? Now? How is that possible? Are you sure?" Just as Mary's perplexity, fear and questioning did not render her unfit to give birth to our Lord, our confusion, fear and doubt do not disqualify us from being God-bearers.

So all of us are qualified to be God-bearers, but how? Obviously none of us can be Jesus' physical parent — Mary did that once and for all. One commentator puts it like this, "We are all Mary... We have all been made pregnant by God's grace." We have all been spiritually

impregnated. The God who became flesh in Jesus Christ yearns to become invisible and tangible, physical and human, embodied and enfleshed in our lives. As St. Paul describes it: all of us are being transformed into the Lord's image one degree at a time by the work of the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:18). Why? Because God plans to do marvelous things for the world through us. Hear the good news as the angel Gabriel might speak it:

Greetings, favored ones! God is with you - yes you, and you and you, and all of us together. Fear not! You — each one of you individually and all of you together — have found favor in the sight of God. You will be God-bearers, persons through whom God plans to do marvelous things for the world. Yes, I know that you are all just ordinary, everyday people, maybe even people who think you are of little or no account, yet you have been created in God's image. Each of you is gifted with the Holy Spirit who will guide you and work through you to bring hope and healing, peace and prosperity, comfort and joy to others around you.

Still wondering how you can be a God-bearer? You might start with a prayer, maybe something like this:

Here I am, Lord, your servant, ready to do your will. Show me how to be a God-bearer, how to make a positive difference wherever I am this week, and give me the courage to do it. Amen.