

“Surrender”  
Luke 1:26-38  
Rev. Jonathan Cornell  
12-8-13

---

As a father now to a little girl, I’m quite certain that there will come a day not long from now when our home will be inundated with Disney Princess paraphernalia. Don’t worry, I am already getting counseling for it now, so I’m ready when the day comes. I am not unique in the fate that awaits me. Daddies of little girls around the world are summoned into the royal court of playtime for their daughters’ princess pageantry. One pastor I know tells this story:

I came home one day to find my daughter ready to play dress up. ‘Daddy,’ she said, ‘I am Princess Mary.’ Princess Mary? I’m not familiar with that Disney Story. And she said, ‘No, Daddy, it’s not Princess Mary from Disney, it’s from the Bible.’ Ah, I see, how could I be so stupid?

‘So if you’re Mary, does that make me Joseph?’ Nope. ‘Does Daddy get to be a wise man?’ And his wife chimed in from the other room... ‘Not even close.’ Well who am I then? And with a deadpan look she says, ‘You, Daddy, are the donkey.’

There are times when we approach Mary that we have in our minds this image of her as a kind of princess. No question, we should have a high view of her significance, but I’m not sure hers is the stuff of Disney animation. Because I think when we treat her this way, we lose some of the grit, some of the scandal of what this teenage girl who became an instrument of the most high God endured in surrendering her life to the invitation of God.

We are in a series entitled *The Way Home*, and last week we were awoken, maybe even abruptly, to our own deafness and distance from God, and this week we, with Mary, are confronted with the challenge to surrender our right to shape our lives, and become willing to allow our gracious God to uniquely and lovingly and sometimes even painfully shape our lives.

[Movie Clip from Nativity]

**In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!” But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He 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 father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”**

**And Mary said to the angel, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?”**

**And the angel answered 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 called holy—the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.” And Mary said, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” And the angel departed from her.**

The story of Mary is anything but a fairytale. This 15 year-ish year old girl lives in a challenging and sometimes very unforgiving culture. She is in preparation for an arranged marriage. She is hard working and lives in a society in which taxes are as high as 80%, where children are often sold into slavery to cover the debts of the family. In this day, 1 in every 2 women died in childbirth. It is in this environment that Mary first receives the news that she will give birth to a child, which is shocking because she has not been with someone. Couldn't God have waited just a few months?

The second surprise is that this child will be a king, not an earthly king but the promised Messiah King. Author and theologian Scott McKnight says, “For theologians this event is all about incarnation, God became real human flesh. Yet for Mary this is a coronation, because the child growing inside her would be king. Perhaps one of the most overlooked surprises of Christmas is that Mary decides to go along with God's plan.”

She would be labeled as an adulteress; life would never be the same for her again. Christmas for us is marked by such warmth and anticipation, but for Mary her surrender meant that this first Christmas would be more fearful than festive. Would her family disown her? Would Joseph accept her? Would the mob come for her? These are the kind of questions she lived with as the bulge in her tummy continued to grow.

There scholars point out a few of the options Mary had, which often go unsaid in church because they're a little hard to stomach. She could have accused a Roman Soldier of taking advantage of her and impregnating her, in which case a public hearing would take place before the community. She could have disappeared for the duration of her pregnancy and then returned when the child was born and claimed that she was taken captive. She could have even attempted crude and dangerous methods to end the pregnancy.

But instead of all these horrible things, Mary says one of the most daring and faith-filled statements in all of history: **I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.**

You and I might be familiar with the response of Mary to the angel, but what sometimes gets overlooked as Mary in her awestruck and perplexed response is the way in which she is addressed by these celestial messengers. They say to her, **Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you.** Mary, even though she was probably illiterate, would have recognized the echo of these Old Testament words, as these were the very same words

spoken over so many heroes of the faith. They were spoken to Noah, who was called to build an ark; these were the same words spoken to Gideon when he was called to raise up a small but mighty army; these were the very same words spoken to Samuel when he was called to raise up a whole new company of preachers we know today as the prophets. And now this God of Abraham was talking to her using the very same words spoken to the leaders and the heroes of the faith. “The Lord is with you.”

But why me, why Mary? Why didn't God choose someone with more resources, someone with more strength, someone with more power? “Why me?” Mary probably thought. Because God did not need power, or resources, or strength for the incarnation. All that God needed from us, all that God required from Mary, was surrender.

It's interesting that this story is not the only story of miraculous conception in Luke's Gospel. Who else experiences a miraculous conception? John the Baptist. Zechariah, the priest, the man who day in and day out went to the temple and stood in the holy of holies, that place where heaven and earth intersect, and offered sacrifices. Zechariah and Elizabeth are told that they would have a son and Zechariah responds in disbelief and is struck dumb. And it's interesting that both of these stories are found in what Gospel book? Luke. And does anybody know what Luke's profession is? He's a physician. So of all the gospel writers, the one who would believe least in the plausibility of a miraculous conception would certainly have been Luke, and here he is the one who is most preoccupied with these amazing stories. So Zechariah responds to the angel's announcement with doubt and is muted so that he could see the work of God, but Mary responds with faith, “Let it be so.”

Peter Larson puts it this way: “Despite our best efforts to keep him out, God intrudes into our lives. The life of Jesus is bracketed by two impossibilities, the first is a virgin's womb, and the second is an empty tomb. Jesus entered through a door marked no entrance and he left through a door marked no exit.”

There is a man I know from Minnesota, he's a pastor named Greg Boyd and he describes an experience of trying to connect with a hardened teenager who had been convicted and sentenced to prison. And so to get to know him, he decided he was just going to ask a lot of questions. And in the midst of his questioning, he asked about the boy's mom. “That's her,” the boy exclaimed, “sitting over there. And there's no one like her. I've been locked up for a year and a half, and she comes to see me every Sunday. And do you know how many busses she takes to come and see me?” With tears welling up in his eyes, “Seven busses, she takes seven busses just to be with me.” It was in that moment that he knew exactly what it would take to communicate with him about God with us.

Christ in the Gospel only comes alive when we realize the length of the journey that God went to be with us. That the journey from Mary's womb to empty tomb is the furthest distance in the world, the Lord literally moved heaven and earth to enter into our humanity because of that sacrifice and his blessed mother's faith we can now say that there is no one like this child, there is no one like this king. That the Lord of all came in the belly of a girl, God has come to be with us. Anything that God has done, he can do

now; anything that God has done anywhere, God can do here; and anything that God has done for anyone, God can do for you.

It's remarkable to think that the fate of all creation hung in the hands of a teenager. It's remarkable to think that God can use anybody as long as they have trust in him. It's incredible to think that God would choose to enter human history in the midst of such turmoil, violence, and such oppression. He took more than seven busses in this journey to the cross. And when he is tried as a criminal on this instrument of torture, do you know who is going to be there by his side? This woman of remarkable courage and this woman of unparalleled surrender. This woman called Mary is the most unusual of princesses, a life well lived, a love masterfully given, and a faith that can't be stopped.

Mary finds in the midst of the burden and the joy of this particular job she has to do that the Father will never disown her, that her true love will never leave her, and that her own son, the incarnate God with us, will even invite her into the life of God's new kingdom.

You know, perhaps you came to church today so accustomed to the notion of Christmas that nothing surprises you anymore. Maybe the story is so routine that all wonder and mystery has been removed. This is what happens when the story gets separated from history; it denigrates into a form of mythology. And in those moments, the potency of Christmas is exchanged for the sentiments of the season. If you get nothing else out of this message this morning, hear this: Mary was a real person in a real place in a real moment in history with a real faith in a very real God. And her faith, it was all that she had, and it was anything but make-believe.