

Mary: Offering Herself
Luke 1:26-55
December 17, 2006

Friday afternoon our family went to see the new movie, *The Nativity Story*. We arrived early enough for good seats. The theater filled relatively quickly so that before the previews started the only seats to be found were in the front rows. I saw at least one instance in which a younger family gave up their seats in the middle of the theater for an older family; the younger family moved to the front rows. After the previews started and the theater was dark, an older couple came in looking for seats. Again two women left their seats in the middle of the theater and moved to the front rows, giving up their prime seats for someone else. I was touched by the servant ministry displayed by those who gave up their seats to make others more comfortable.

That was simply the prelude to the movie itself, which I would heartily recommend for older children and beyond. There are a few brief scenes of violence that could be disturbing to young children. I found the movie a great complement to our Bethlehem Experience. The movie, of course, lacked the multi-sensory dimension of smelling the incense and dusty hay and being kissed by a camel! One scholar notes that “It’s a respectful and historically authentic film.”¹ It offers a reliable glimpse of the context in which the Christmas story is set. Before you go, read chapters 1 and 2 of the gospels of Matthew and Luke.

Our survey of the Cast of Christmas leads us today to Mary, the mother of Jesus. Mary is a young teenager, probably around 14 or 15, when the angel Gabriel appears to her and announces that she is to bear God’s child. Mary is engaged to a man named Joseph. According to the custom of that day, their parents had arranged the marriage. Once the agreement has been made, the couple lives apart for one year. Then the groom comes to take the bride to his parents’ home to live. The wedding celebration lasts a week.

The angel Gabriel tells Mary that God favors her. God specially chose her for this announcement and for this calling. But as the call to bear a child is revealed to her, Mary very well could have great misgivings about this honor. Having a child out of wedlock was reason for execution as a criminal. One would usually not consider stoning as a criminal to be a blessing. If I were Mary, I would have asked, “What will my parents think? Will they throw me out of the house? What will the townspeople say? And Joseph – will he still marry me?”

But Luke does not tell us that Mary has any such doubts. If she does, she does not express them aloud. She does inquire as to how this would happen since she is not yet married. The angel responds with assurance of God's power and protection.

The way the angel poses what will happen to Mary is not a request. She is not asked if she will bear the Son of God. She is simply chosen. But she responds to the calling with a heartfelt, "Yes!" "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

Mary says Yes to God at the risk of rejection by her family and townspeople. In submitting herself to God's will for her life, she will lose her honor within her society. Her willing collaboration with God to give birth to a divinely ordained child will make her disreputable. God's call leads Mary outside what is socially acceptable. Nevertheless, at great risk to her reputation, Mary willingly offers herself as God's servant. And consequently, Mary's "Yes!" is blessed, and through Mary, the whole world is blessed with the gift of God's Son.

We learn from Mary that being favored and chosen by God does not mean sitting in an ivory palace receiving the accolades of those not chosen. To be chosen by God is to be commissioned for service. You know that if you have selected for leadership in a volunteer service organization or even in employment you might hold. To be chosen means that you will need to "put your nose to the grindstone."

And then, as if hard work wasn't enough, oftentimes God calls us to do what conventional society would deem shameful or ridiculous. Sometimes God calls us to take a lesser paying job because a company really needs our gifts and skills to make it a healthier place. Colleagues would laugh at us, for from their perspective the only thing that matters is the almighty dollar. But Christians know that we are asked to be faithful, not successful. Sometimes God calls us to spend our vacation in an underdeveloped country training other people in a skill or in the faith. Friends might consider us crazy for spending a couple thousand dollars to work in a third world country, when we could have had a relaxing vacation in Hawaii.

However, as Mary teaches us, to be chosen by God is to be commissioned for service to others. And such service usually comes with a price.

Michelle Robinette, a 53 year old grandmother from St. Paul, Minnesota, heard such a radical call from God. She sold her home and left her five adult children and grandchildren behind to open "Robin's Nest" in Montego Bay, Jamaica. After seeing a sorrowful young boy begging on the

streets of Jamaica, Michelle knew God wanted her to offer a safe, secluded, Christian environment to children who would otherwise be homeless or living in an overcrowded orphanage on this Caribbean island.

Today a former bed and breakfast has become the very “nest” Michelle envisioned. And within its freshly painted walls decorated with artwork and Bible verses are the echoes of six Jamaican babies and young children, plus three foster children Michelle has adopted, who are being transformed through the love and nurturing of Michelle and her handful of volunteers. Additional church volunteers occasionally come to decorate, do repairs, and help out. “I want children to be nurtured and rocked, bathed and baby-oiled, sung to and told Jesus loves them,” Michelle explains.²

What was it that made Mary say “Yes!” to God’s call and offer herself to God’s service? What is it that motivates Michelle and people like her to make such personal sacrifices to participate in God’s mission?

Mary and Michelle have a sense of a bigger picture. They know that they are not called simply to serve themselves and for their own glory. God has given them a grander vision in which the needs of many people are met. They understand themselves to be instruments whom God can use to make that grander vision a reality.

During her visit to Elizabeth, Mary sings the song known as the Magnificat. She praises God for the great things God will do through her Son. Her vision of Jesus is of a just ruler who will usher in the reign of God. She trusts in this promise of God, for as the angel said, “For nothing will be impossible with God.” Mary offers herself in order that the larger dream for all God’s people might be possible.

Sometimes God calls us to risk our reputation, to step out on faith, to do something radical. Sometimes we are called out of our comfort zones. If we assess the calling on surface attributes alone, we may be likely to decline the invitation, for the risk is too great, the outcome uncertain, and the work too hard. But when we live with a sense of God’s dream for all humanity, we are more likely to say, “Yes, Here am I, a servant of the Lord. Send me, use me.”

In ministry I occasionally find myself in challenging situations that require great sacrifice and leave seemingly little reward. There are days in which I am tempted to “throw in the towel,” to give up because the personal demands and toll are too great. As I then begin to seek new direction for my life, I go back to God’s call to discover where God is leading me to go, what new thing God has in store for me. When I return to God’s claim on my life, I realize that God is calling me to be exactly where I am. I simply need to keep myself grounded in that call and remember the larger picture. I need to

keep it all in proper perspective, recognizing that I am not called to be comfortable, but I am called to offer my life in service to God.

One of our favorite family phrases is from Robin Williams' *The Bicentennial Man*, who is fond of saying, "One is glad to be of service." That's a contemporary version of Mary's, "Here I am, a servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." "One is glad to be of service."

Mary's life was far from the romantic image of a mother cradling a newborn baby. Mary's call to be the mother of the Son of God led her into a challenging life marked by enrichment as well as suffering. Hers was a fulfilling life because she offered herself in collaboration with the will of God.

May we have the courage of Mary
to seek out the call of God upon our lives,
to offer ourselves in obedience to God's will, and
to delight in being of service to one another.

O Wondrous God, we rejoice in the life and ministry of Mary, the mother of Jesus. We give thanks for her humble obedience to your call and to her life of servanthood. With the fruit of her womb, she bore the hope of new life for all the world. Her son Jesus came to turn things upside down and right side up.

We need Jesus to come again to turn things right side up, for once again the rich are richer and the poor poorer. The powerful have more power and the powerless are trapped. The full are well fed and the hungry starve. We confess that in our world today war and terror are accepted, greed and meanness are condoned. We've built communities that are divided, we ignore those who are lonely, hurting, or different. Forgive us and pardon us, O God.

May Jesus be conceived anew within us. Bring to birth within us purity of heart that we might receive our neighbors with love. Nurture the seed of faith that our love for Jesus might blossom into deeds and words of kindness. Empower us to stand against the forces of evil and injustice which kill the spirit. May the presence of Christ come afresh to turn things upside down and right side up.

We pray for persons whose lives are in distress and turmoil. Underneath the supposed joy of this season, we acknowledge the hurt and pain that resides in too many lives. Embrace those who are estranged from loved ones. Companion one who is lonely and afraid. Melt the heart of one whose heart is hardened. Abide with those who suffer from illness. Offer

peace to those who grieve for loved ones. Walk with those who serve in the armed forces and care for their families at home.

Many years ago your Holy Presence brought the hope of peace to the little town of Bethlehem. Bethlehem in Palestine, Jerusalem in Israel and the surrounding nations of the Middle East long once again for the gift of peace. We offer our lives to continue the message and ministry of Jesus: to work for justice and fairness, to bring balance to our living, to share your love with all people, and to make your reign become real here on earth.

United with Jesus we pray as he has taught us, Our Father

¹ Frederica Mathewes-Green, "Faithful Rnediton of 'The Nativity Story,'" *Beliefnet.org*, retrieved December 16, 2006.

² Martha N. Wolowicz, "Secure in Robinette's 'Nest,'" *Christian History*, October-November 1998. Quoted in *Homiletics*, December 2000.