

The Journey to Bethlehem
Part 1: Mary of Nazareth (Willingness)

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Transcription
Countryside Community Church
December 3, 2017

Scripture: Luke 1:26-38

I. There's Something About Mary

In Advent, when we remember Christ's coming 2,000 years ago, I find myself asking another question: What if Christ came back in our day? What form would Christ appear in? Would he just be like the Jesus of yesterday? Times have changed. Maybe Christ's form would change as well. When I consider how Jesus might appear differently today, I look at how he appeared originally for some guidance.

Of course, long ago we know that Jesus came in a very, very unexpected way. Two thousand years ago, you would probably be looking for the Savior of the World to come from Rome, not Israel. Or if you knew the Messiah would appear in Israel, you'd expect his birthplace to be Jerusalem, not Bethlehem. You *certainly* wouldn't expect the Messiah's hometown to be Nazareth, which in Jesus' day was the equivalent of Hillbilly Land. If you knew the Messiah would come from Hillbilly Land, you'd at least expect him to be born to the mayor of the town or one of its other leaders. The last place you'd expect is for the Messiah to be born to an unwed mother, betrothed to a carpenter who, in his day would have been the modern equivalent of a janitor.

Nothing wrong with being a janitor. Nothing wrong with being an unwed woman. It's just that most people would not expect to go looking for Jesus' parents among these folks. Then there's the question of Jesus' actual place of birth – in a cattle barn next to an inn. That's the modern-day equivalent of the tool shed behind Motel 6! Extremely unconventional. Extremely unexpected.

Given how Jesus appeared long ago, if I were looking for him today I would expect you to be shaken, not stirred. So when I ask myself, for instance, would Jesus come back as a man again or a woman? I would put my money on a woman. God already did the man thing so why not be a bit ... unexpected?

We can go a step further. Would the new Messiah be rich or poor? Of course, God already did the poor thing, but still in our day we're always expecting great things from the privileged and the wealthy, not the poor. So even though God did it before, I would still put my money on the poor.

Now, what color would Jesus be if Jesus reappeared in the United States? Would he be white or black? Of course there's lots of colors to choose from, but I would say *black* because African-Americans have the longest history of discrimination in our country. So, many in of our society wouldn't be looking to the African-American community for a Savior.

The kind of messianic profile we've assembled so far, then, is of a poor, black woman. Now, what religion would she be? If you were to choose between Jew, Christian, or Muslim, which would you choose? To answer this question, I might ask myself which one of these would be the least expected even to a poor, black woman in our country. I'm betting on the Muslim.

Now that we're looking for a poor, black, Muslim woman, what gender orientation or expression might she be? Would she be straight? Would she be gay or bisexual? Might she be transgender? My guess is that even a poor, black, Muslim woman would expect the Savior of the World to be straight. So I'm going with transgender – probably the least expected not only for her, but for many.

How do you feel about this characterization of Jesus returning as a poor, black, Muslim, transgender woman? If she makes you feel uncomfortable, or even shocked, then you are in the perfect position to feel what the ancients would have felt about the Savior of the World being born to a poor, Palestinian family from the backwaters of Israel, to an unwed mother betrothed to the ancient equivalent of a janitor, and born in the ancient version of a tool shed next to a Motel 6.

Yet what if we knew one more thing about our modern Messiah: that she was born of a virgin? That would be truly impressive. No longer would we be asking, "Is this person God's choice or not?" Instead, many of us would be asking, "How I can love and serve God's Chosen One?"

During Advent, a lot of us in the more moderate and liberal churches find it hard to wrap our minds or hearts around the claim that Jesus was born of a virgin. Much good historical-critical scholarship has been done on this ancient story that throws the historicity of the Virgin Birth into question. Quite frankly, I don't believe Jesus was born of a virgin. In my past, I have had enough questions about this historicity of this and

other parts of the birth story that I have thrown the whole thing out as irrelevant and unhelpful for life in the modern world. Yet nowadays, I actually feel closer to the Christmas story than perhaps ever in my life. I feel close to it because, for many, many years, the realization has been sinking deeper and deeper into me that this story, like many in the Bible, is trying to tell us things that are true whether they happened that way or not.

To me, whether you believe in the virgin birth or not is irrelevant. The question that this story is trying to confront us with is the same, whether you believe in its historicity or not. That question is: "Do you believe that this child, who is not born to people we would expect, or in the way we would expect, is nevertheless the direct result of God's will being done?" It does not matter whether or not you believe Jesus was born of a virgin. What matters is if you believe that this highly unexpected person is the one God expects you to follow if you call yourself Christian. If your answer is yes, then there's a follow-up question: "What are the implications of following this unexpected Messiah in my own life? How am I doing God's will on earth as it is in heaven, following this surprising Lord?"

II. There's Something About Luke

Do you know the story of the Three Little Pigs? In our 9 a.m. service this morning, a child in the balcony blurted out, "Everybody knows that story!" I'm guessing he's right, so I don't need to rehearse this story for you. But I've got three pieces of information that I need to tell you as your minister about this story. I hope you're not disappointed. Are you ready?

First: I have found out that pigs don't actually build houses. Never happened.

Second: I have discovered that pigs do not speak English. Everybody knows they speak Pig Latin!

Third: Based on these two facts and many others, I am absolutely certain that this story never happened at all. Santa may be real, but this story is completely made up!

I know this may disappoint you. But I've got a feeling that, like me, you are not ready to throw out the story as irrelevant. Why? Because it teaches us lessons that are true whether it happened that way or not. Like, "Don't be lazy and build your house – or your life – out of whatever is easiest," and, "You need to expect that trouble will come your way, so prepare."

It's interesting to me how we can see so readily how truth-telling these fables and myths can be, yet when we turn to the Bible, it's suddenly like, "If it didn't happen that way, OMG! It must not be true!" Are you sure?

Sometimes, I actually think that it would be better if we would just take the entire Bible and say, "You know what? This whole thing is fiction." It's not all fiction but if, as a mental exercise, you say, "What if this whole thing were made up but trying to tell us something important about God, and our relationship with God and each other?" Then we would read through these stories without asking "Did it really happen this way or not?" Instead, we would ask, "What is the author trying to tell me that is so important here?" This would be the central question.

We've talked before about the "mythological imagination" of Scripture. The scriptures are not so much trying to teach us what happened 2000 years ago or 3000 years ago, but to tell us what keeps on happening over and over again on up to today. A lot of Scripture is historically accurate, but some of it is historically dubious at best. Nevertheless, all of it is trying to tell us something important about God and ourselves. Even if it was all factual – just purely objective, historical fact – even then we would have to ask ourselves why the authors chose to relate one particular fact over another. For instance, aside from bread, fish and wine, we really have no idea what food Jesus preferred to eat. Did he like figs? Coconuts? We have no idea. They apparently did not think that Jesus' personal taste in food was terribly important.

Who was Jesus' best friend? What was Jesus' favorite location in Israel? Apparently, these facts weren't considered important, either, even as you can assume Jesus had thoughts on these subjects. The authors could have relayed many facts to us, but instead chose to relay only certain ones. Namely, they chose to relay the things that have some bearing on what happens over and over again in our world on up to the present, not simply what happened back then.

When I hear the story of Jesus' birth, therefore, I'm not asking which things are historically accurate and which things aren't. Since we're reading Luke's version of the birth story, I'm asking what is Luke trying to tell me that still happens to this day? Theoretically, I should be able to open the newspaper, read the news, then ask, "How does Luke's Christmas story inform my understanding of the news today?"

Actually, a lot of the story speaks to today's news. For instance, I find it very interesting that Luke chose to tell us Mary's response to the scenario God gave her about Jesus. When God laid things out for Mary, Luke tells us that Mary gave her consent to what God wanted to happen. She said, "Yes. Let this happen according to your word."

Luke could have just said, "God said such-and-such will happen and it did." Yet Luke found it very important to say in essence, "And Mary said 'yes.' She gave her consent to this."

It makes me wonder if Mary had said no. What would have happened? There's certainly nothing in this story, nor in all the gospels, that would suggest that God would have just stomped off in a huff saying, "Forget you." Likely, if Mary turned God down, we would be hearing today about the Virgin Martha (or some other woman), not the Virgin Mary, and God would have been there for Mary just as much as God ever was before.

What is so significant today about the fact that, according to Luke's story, Mary gave her consent to God before acting on God's plan for her? When I open up my paper and I read the news today, I read a lot about people in power who are forcing their will upon others who have no ability to give their consent despite their opinions. Luke's version of the Christmas story reminds me that, if even the Creator of the Universe – who wanted something to happen really, really, really badly – would not move forward on the plan with someone who is poor and powerless without her consent, *why would we ever do such a thing?*

III. There's Something About Willingness

I find other insights that come from this one line where Mary offers her consent to God. For instance, if we look further at Mary's response, it is clear that she is aware of what she is getting herself into. On the one hand, Mary says, "From now on, all generations will call me blessed." She knows God is offering her an amazing opportunity. And it was! Mary has been remembered throughout all the generations that followed because she said yes to God. Yet it is also clear that Mary is very much aware of the trouble this gift will bring. Her words envision so much social upheaval that they would make even Karl Marx say, "Wow. That's really radical."

For instance, there's this line in which Mary considers the implications of Jesus' birth: *"God has performed mighty deeds with God's arm. God has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. God has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble."*

If these things are going to happen through Jesus, all the tables are being turned upside down – tables that the world has set up and is quite happy to remain in place. Mary

knows there's trouble ahead for her child and for her family. She certainly did not say "yes" to the gift without also saying "yes" to the trouble the gift would bring.

I think that Mary is also saying "yes" within a context that is particularly hard to respond to. In a sense, what God is proposing has not happened before in the history of the world. In a sense, we could talk about a "virgin birth," but we can also talk about a "virginal moment" in history. There are no history books you can go back to and say, "It works like this. Here's what I can expect to happen." This is brand new territory and she's saying, "Yes." Why? Probably because, as they say, *the fire in her heart burned more brightly than the fires around her* when she considered the trouble ahead.

As we've already acknowledged, Mary probably could have said "no" to this "virginal moment" – and who would have blamed her if she had? Yet no one likely would have ever known she did say no. We would have simply heard about the Virgin Martha (or whomever gave her consent) giving birth to the Messiah. So there's another important thing the story is trying to tell us. That is, *when God comes calling, it's safe to pick up the phone.*

You can pick up the phone, hear what God is calling you to do ... and then you can decline the Call should you feel that's what you want to do. Every time God comes calling, God comes primarily to offer you a gift. And like any gift, it's okay to say, "Thanks, but I'd rather not have it." God does not pressure you when God offers you a gift. I think one of the reasons God does not place pressure on us is that there's always some trouble that comes with the gift, if you accept it. Any gift God gives us makes us more visible in the world. The world doesn't necessarily appreciate our visibility. When we accept God's gifts, they tend to put us on life's radar – which means that people see us, including people who may not like what we're standing for. God's gifts always invite us to put a stake in the ground, of some sort, and stand by it.

Thus, we can hear God's call and say, "That sounds like a great gift, but I would rather decline this one." Does our response in this way prevent God's will from being done? It prevents God's will from being done *through you*, but our response doesn't prevent God's will being done through someone else who is happy to receive it; who believes that the gift outweighs the trouble it may bring. And what happens to you when you decline the gift? You can be sure that God keeps calling; keeps offering other gifts that help you accomplish both God's will and yours in the world.

To be sure, we can go through life perfectly free to keep hitting decline, decline, decline, decline on God's calls. Yet is this really the route to living meaningful or fulfilling life? At some point, we need to accept the call that's made to us. Eventually we need to put a

stake in the ground; become visible in the world rather than staying invisible; put ourselves on life's radar, even to our enemies, rather than continually hiding in the shadows. Always, always, always that choice is ours to make without threat.

Without threat? Yes. This insight is one of the great advancements of our day over some thoughts that have crept into Christianity and corrupted the story. God does not say, "Well, you can decline the call if you want ... and burn in hell!" The choice between doing what God asks or burning in hell is not a free choice. If you are threatened by God if you decline God's invitation, how is God any different than all those people in the news who thrust their will on people by threatening them with dire consequences if they do not consent to what is wanted from them?

If God is the God of the Christmas story, and the story accurately reflects who God is – whether the story happened this way or not - then we can be assured that God never compels us against our will. The choice is always ours.

So, what if God came calling today and said, "You know what? Christ has returned! She's poor. She's black. She's Muslim. And she's transgender. I want you to be among her first disciples!"

You would have the choice. Accept the gift, because it truly is a gift if God is offering it, or say, "You know what? This would cause so much conflict in my life. I'm just not ready to accept this call." God wouldn't "un-grace" you for denying God's call. God would simply find other disciples and move on.

Of course, this is all a very hypothetical situation. To my knowledge, God has not come calling, inviting people to follow a new Messiah. What I do know is God already came calling – 2,000 years ago. A child was born into our world who is Lord and Savior. For 2,000 years, people have been saying, "Yes. I accept your call to serve him." These people are called Christians.

Today, when we hear God's call to us to follow Jesus, we have the advantage of looking back and seeing 2,000 years of people saying, "Yes." Yet just because we know that many have gone before us does not mean we can assume that it's safe to say "yes." We must remember that the same Jesus who utterly shocked people with his unexpected birth 2,000 years ago has not stopped shocking people. Saying "yes" to Jesus in our day should be every bit as uncomfortable as it was when he first appeared in our world. Uncomfortable because this Jesus guy always brings trouble with him even as he brings rich blessings.

I don't think I'm saying anything new to you all when I say that accepting the call to follow Jesus brings not only blessings but trouble. As a congregation, we have been experiencing this very dynamic for a while now.

Two thousand years after Mary accepted God's invitation to help create a "virginal moment" in human history – one that had never been done before – we at Countryside have been faced with a similar invitation, and have responded similarly. We wrestled with the invitation to become the Christian partner in Omaha's Tri-Faith Initiative. Some said "yes," others said "no," and still others said "no, but I'll support those who said 'yes.'" Since this decision, we have experienced both the gift and the trouble the gift brings. And we've kept accepting the gift and the trouble because the gift so far outweighs the trouble it brings – and because, like Mary, the fire that burns in our hearts is far brighter than the fires that burn around us in the world.