

## **Mary, God-bearer**

Luke 1:39-45

A sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Advent

The fourth Sunday in Advent is often called Mary Sunday. In our Luke text for today, Mary goes to stay with Elizabeth, who refers to her as “the mother of my Lord” (Luke 1:43).

Sometimes it is forgotten among us, but in 431 A.D. an ecumenical council of Christian leaders met in Ephesus and declared that Mary is “the God-bearer.” She is unique among all human beings. She is the one chosen by God to bear his Son. We do not want in any way to take away from that.

At the same we are aware that a lot of nonsense has been made out of that. The angel Gabriel had come to Mary and told her she was going to have a baby, a son. Mary was maybe fourteen or fifteen years old. She had no education and was brought up in a good Jewish family, and she said to the angel: “How can this be since I don’t have a husband?” (Luke 1:34). As we look at this text it is a very good way of pointing out how God works.

First of all, it is important to look at what is called the virgin birth. It’s in the creeds, and we confess it, and it sometimes becomes a huge problem. What is this about? Is it possible scientifically? There’s a big Greek word “parthenogenesis,” which means can a female conceive without a male? Biologists use the example of the aphid, a species for whom that is possible, and there’s this big discussion of that possibility. In recent times we have genetic engineering, and other such possibilities.

Then in the literature on the virgin birth one of the big things is the whole matter of the accounts of the gods and goddesses of Greek and Roman ancient times and how they came down from Mount Olympus and mixed themselves among human beings and had children by one means or another. These kinds of stories are associated with great leaders.

This leads people to mistakenly think the virgin birth is what tells people that he is God. But, of course, if that were the case, he would at best be half-God, a demi-God. The Nicene Creed points he is fully human and fully God. So that’s not what it is about. Of course, he wouldn’t be sinless either because Mary was sinful, so again that doesn’t do it. What then is this virgin birth about?

We could ask: What was the greatest miracle of all time? Answer: The one who is holy took care of sin. That's what it is about. Incidentally and far behind is: Therefore, he made life out of death. Therefore, he created something out of nothing (Romans 4:17). Therefore, he took some slaves who were unknown in Egypt and made them a great nation. Incidentally, he was born of a virgin. That is just sort of a blink of the eye.

And what he means for you and me is freedom. Apart from him, we are slaves to "the elemental spirits of the universe" (Galatians 4:3). We are caught in our own sinfulness; we can't escape it. But he came to redeem us, to buy us out of slavery and set us free. "For freedom Christ has set us free . . ." (Galatians 5:1).

This means that we are now for sure free of sin and death. As John 8:36 states: "If the Son makes you free, you are free indeed." We are free from being judged by works, because works are not the way of salvation. He is "the way" (John 14:6). He frees us to live now in this time and place, using the best wisdom we can muster.

To come back to Mary, imagine an angel comes to this young woman and says: "You're going to have a baby." She knew about Sarah, the wife of Abraham who had a baby when she was old, maybe even 90. She knew about Hannah, the mother of Samuel, who had a baby when she was quite old. She knew also about her cousin, Elizabeth, who is having a baby even though she is also old. God can do all kinds of things. That's not the problem.

The problem is she is not married. She knew it would be a scandal. In fact, in the first chapter of Matthew Joseph, being a good man, said quietly: "I will take her." Otherwise, she would have been in big trouble.

We mistakenly think that the angel and Mary had a nice conversation, even a kind of simple negotiation that went like this: He says: "Look, Mary, this is going to happen to you." And she says: "O.K. I agree."

Not at all! First of all, she was not in any way able to understand what was happening, except she knew that with God nothing is impossible.

She knew that, yet who could imagine that God himself would come as a human being? That was impossible for the Jewish mind to think.

Even more than that, it was impossible to think that God would die on the cross. In the third chapter of Mark there's a famous passage about Mary and Jesus' brothers and sisters coming and trying to get Jesus away from the authorities because the

authorities were saying he was crazy, that he should be put away somewhere (Mark 3:20-21).

And later on in Luke, Simeon says to Mary that a sword would pierce her heart; she will one day watch her son die on the cross (Luke 2:35).

It wasn't that she understood what was happening. It also wasn't that the angel Gabriel spoke to her and she agreed. In Luke 1:38, Mary says: Let it be that way. ("Let it be to me according to your word.") Some say that she gave her consent, but as Luther points out: That is not why she is the great example of what it means to believe.

We may think that faith is a kind of fatalism. "Believing" just means being fatalistic about what happens. That is not what it says. It says: "Let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). His word! And who is he? He is the one who does what is otherwise impossible, who brings life out of death, who dies for the ungodly and gives them his holiness. That's what it is about; it's God's promises. As we remind ourselves, his promises are not like ours; his promises are sure and do not fail.

It's not that God chose Mary and then she chose him, as if she then agreed to it. Rather, he chose her, and that was it. And the same is true for you and me. He has made you his own in Baptism and his promises do not fail. "All the promises of God find their Yes in him" (2 Corinthians 1:20). That's what we celebrate at Christmas.

"And Mary said: 'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior!' (Luke 1:39)" Thanks be to God. Amen