

The Mother and the Mothering of God
Luke 1: 26-56

*A sermon preached on the Second Sunday in Advent, December 7, 2008,
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“Four walls, and a view of cypress trees. A girl is there with a mysterious tingling in her. She turns from the window and there is a mist in the room. This is taking shape and in it the girl senses, somewhere, wings. The figure is before her, and is slowly becoming a human shape. But there are wings as well. She is not equipped for such an encounter. She is gazing straight into the form. The wings begin to tremble without wind or any breeze. The form says to her softly, ‘*The miracle is already forming in your womb. In you the Son of God is taking earthly shape.*’

The angel Gabriel, in his nebulous form, begins to dissolve into invisibility. As he disappears, Mary, holding her hand out as though to detain the angelic spirit, feels the resolution in her loins as the angel weakens in air, leaving an empty ordinary room. But behind is a radiance of breath, an ordinary warmth become holy.” -James Dickey

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Do you believe in angels? Do you believe in the “immaculate conception”? I do! And I don’t! But perhaps I do more and more! Surely the people of Jesus’ time believed in angels. They were not so much the radical dualists as are we, Platonists who see a strict division between this world and the next, nor the Aristotelians that others of us are, “believing” in only the empirically verifiable. No, they believed, as did Luther so many centuries later, that this world was co-extensive with the spiritual realm, and filled with spirits both evil and good.

Muslims more than Jews or Christians believe in angels. Everything revealed to Mohammed came through this self-same angel Gabriel who revealed to Mary her seeming parthenogenesis. Muslims believe that the only human God ever spoke to directly was Moses, and that Allah makes all other revelation through angels. Jews—especially those of the Hasidic tradition, believe in angels. And we—we Christians—are we not a little like old children, who do not quite dare disbelieve in Santa Claus, not wanting to slam the spiritual door shut on the possible beating of angel wings, but mostly thinking it is just lovely Christmas mythology?

But, I ask, isn’t there possibly more to it than this? Ted Loder writes in *Tracks in the Straw* that Mary herself is mystified with the winged Gabriel’s message. The angel, you see, does not say, “Hail, Mary, you are preggers!” No, the angel says, “Hail Mary, God **favors** you. God is **with** you!” (Translate it: “Emmanuel!”) And so Loder asks: “*Why? Of all the possible reasons, cut to the main one. Mary is confused because if God is with her, why can’t she see God, touch God? If God favors her, loves her, where is*

God? That is the core issue of Christmas, if not of religion itself. If God is real, why isn't God as evident to us as everything else that is real."

But it did get real. Mary was pregnant, as it came to pass in those days of Caesar Augustus; pregnant with divinity. -With the converging of worlds simultaneously human and divine, that are not in fact totally divergent worlds. That is after all what angels message; what angels ARE. Even more, that is what Mary was, and is, and ever shalt be. The long tradition of the church holds not only that God birthed the human through Mary, but, far more tremendously mysterious, Mary birthed not only the human Jesus, but also divinity!!!!

Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker have written a stunner of a new book, *Saving Paradise*. They retrieve the relevance of the first millennium of Christianity for today by informing us that the dominate motifs in art and theology focused not on the atoning death but the paradise-restoring birth of Christ:

"The Council of Ephesus in 431 declared Mary to be Theotokos (the Mother of God.) In other words, they said she gave birth both to the humanity and the divinity of her son. In early church art, she was often enthroned like her son, resembling images of Isis, the queen of heaven, who is sometimes shown nursing her son Hippolytus, as Mary was shown nursing Jesus."

Is that entirely far-fetched? Do you believe with me that not only did God birth us, but that our job while on this earth is to try to birth something of God? And is this not the great inversion, even the great subversion, that Mary announces right after the angel announces to her? Mary's own annunciation is a stunner! The God I am going to birth, she says in far more felicitous words, is one who will seek to return, re-tilt, the world back to God! The greatest of all topsy-turvy days is at hand in this birthing of Jubilee, where things will turn again to justice and right relation.

*"His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away
empty."*

This is what God wants to birth through us all! This holy Birth of all births might better be theologized less about God's fathering Jesus and more about Mary's mothering the world back into God; back into God's original paradise of both heaven and earth.

In the afore-mentioned book, *Saving Paradise*, the authors describe the exquisite nave of perhaps the most stunning cathedral in the world, the sixth century Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, converted into the Ayasofya mosque in the fifteenth century:

“Across the nave from the imperial door, the towering apse rises high above the chancel. In its glittering gold conch, a beautiful mosaic of Mary, Theotokos, gazes calmly and benevolently upon her visitors. She and the child on her lap appear tiny from the floor of the nave. On her right alongside the conch, the exquisitely lovely angel Gabriel is graced with resplendent eagle’s wing; on the left are a few traces of the angel Michael. ...

We climbed the long ramp up the women’s balcony and surveyed its elegant halls, lit by large windows. The balcony is level with the conch of the apse, and from one end of it we could almost touch the mosaics of Mary and Gabriel we had seen from the floor far below. The enormous apparitions, at least fifteen feet tall, are breathtakingly beautiful at close range. They have stately, peaceful countenances.....

The apse image of Mary dates from the ninth or tenth century. The angel Gabriel said to her, ‘Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you... Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High.’ In reflecting on her pregnancy, Mary magnified God by proclaiming a revolution of justice.”

This mothering of God births a divine humanity that would infuse the world with justice and mercy. This is an absolutely radical inversion of the order of the day; of the oppressive masculinist power dominance of the home in the culture of the *paterfamilias*, writ large into the patriarchal polis and the oppressive, totalitarian state.

The enlargement of that mothering message indicts and changes the world:

“Mary’s dignity and power were reflected in the depictions of other mothers. In the arch of the apse of St. Maria Maggiore, the story of Herod’s slaughter of the innocents in Matthew 2: 1-12 focuses on the mothers. A dozen of them, their hair loosened in grief, hold the bodies of their infants and stand erect, heads unbowed, before Herod upon his throne, indicting him for his crimes and demanding justice. The narthex of the thirteenth-century Chora Church in Istanbul, Turkey, has a series of scenes that tell this same story. In the first fresco, mothers fight fiercely with soldiers, grasping with their bare hands at swords and spears. They hold their sons tightly as the soldiers pull them away and impale their small bodies. Then, a group of mothers sit in a circle on the ground, their hair streaming down their shoulders and backs in mourning. They hug the corpses of their children and weep in lamentation. Finally, their hair still loose and holding their infants, they stand before the enthroned Herod, staring at him face to face, shaming him with their eyes.”

Are not such eyes iconic for the eyes of God; for the ennobled justice-birthing, jubilating words of Mary? And is not true Christmas about such mothering of God into the world on all our parts? The true work of Christmas is about as easy as birthing a child, or so I imagine from two times coaching from the sidelines. But it is our work! It is our calling!

Christmas might well be less about Santa Claus coming to our children and more about teaching our children to join us to be increasingly a St. Nicholas to the world, all year long. It is about the life-long faithfulness of a Mary to her son: womb, to unbelievably horrifying and unjust cross, to empty tomb. Mary: always there, always mothering God into being.

As if I were lifting up the most treasured of Christmas ornaments out of the old packing box, every year when I take out the boxed adornments of the Good Friday vigil a shiver goes through me when I find the little fragment of text that puts the sacrament of communion into the perspective of Mary. In a rage of love and justice that would shame the world to rights, she proclaims over the meal we are about to receive: “But this is MY BODY, MY BLOOD!” No, this meal is not only about God fathering Jesus into existence through Mary and then incorporating us into the Body of Christ, but rather about Mary’s mothering God into our hearts and minds and wills and strengths that we too might incorporate the *Hodos*, the agonizing Way of birthing the world to rights. May we seek the more to live out this conception, gestating in Advent hope, and birthing Christmas. May we, too, dare to say “let it be with us according to your living Word,” the Word made flesh that births God!

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