

A Storytelling Commentary on Luke 1:26-38

Thomas E. Boomershine, PhD

The annunciation or announcement of Jesus in Luke is one of the most powerful stories in the whole of the tradition. Annunciation means “announcement” and the telling of this story is then an announcement of Jesus’ birth.

There are two announcement stories in the traditions of Abraham that are precedents for this story. The announcement of the birth of Ishmael to Hagar has the most direct connections. Hagar, Sarai’s slave, has gotten pregnant when Sarai gave her to Abraham as a wife because she was barren. When Hagar knew that she had conceived, she treated Sarai with contempt and Sarai was harsh with her and Hagar ran away. The angel of the Lord finds her and tells her to go back and says: “Now you have conceived and shall bear a son; you shall call him Ishmael, for the Lord has given heed to your affliction. He shall be a wild ass of a man, with his hand against everyone, and everyone’s hand against him; and he shall live at odds with all his kin.” (Gen. 16:11-12) The other is the announcement of the birth of Isaac by the three men who come to Abraham at the oaks of Mamre (Gen. 18.1-15) This is a delightful story in part because of Sarah’s laughter. But both are earlier stories in the storytelling traditions of Israel that provide the framework for this announcement to Mary. Either would be an interesting story to tell prior to the Luke story.

The translation of Gabriel’s greeting to Mary is difficult. The traditional translation was “Hail Mary, full of grace.” The NRSV translation, “Greetings, favored one” is linguistically accurate but totally foreign to greetings in normal English. The literal meaning of the Greek word, *xairete*, is “rejoice.” It was a widely used greeting in ancient Greek and was a nice way of saying hello. It is the same word that Jesus says to the two women in Matthew’s story of the resurrection (Mt. 28.9). The spirit of this greeting is: “I’ve got good news for you,” or “Whoopee.” However the word is translated, it is a warm and gracious “Hello, blessed one. The Lord is with you.”

Mary’s response is to be troubled or disturbed. Why was Mary troubled and wondered in her heart what this greeting might mean? One reason is that

when divine beings address young women in the ancient world, it was appropriate for them to wonder just what this male god might have in mind. A popular and well-known story in antiquity was the story of Leda and the swan. Zeus saw the beautiful young woman, Leda, from heaven and came down as a swan and had intercourse with her. Since these stories were widely known and were widely told in the Greco-Roman world, it was fully appropriate for Mary to wonder what does this greeting from a divine being might mean. Specifically, is this a prelude to a more intimate relationship? Gabriel's response to her is profoundly comforting and consoling. "Don't be afraid." And one of the things his words meant to anyone who knew the story of Leda was: "Don't be afraid I'm not going to rape you."

The angel's words here have the same structure as the angel's words to Hagar (Gen. 16). He comes with a word of consolation and hope. His voice is both authoritative and very intimate. Don't tell this as a pronouncement in a loud, deep voice. His word is spoken intimately, quietly, and lovingly in order to assure and provide consolation for a woman who is prone to be very troubled.

Mary's response is usually translated: "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" It's not an inappropriate translation, but the Greek is more explicit and literally means: "How can this be since I have not known a man?" This is the same phrase that is used throughout the Old Testament to describe sexual intercourse. To know a man is to have sex with him. Mary's question is in fact more direct and more physically descriptive than the translation "I am a virgin."

Gabriel's answer to Mary is both mysterious and direct: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." "Overshadow" is a translation of the Greek word, *episkiazo*, which is used in Acts 5 to describe the healing shadow of the apostles and the cloud of God's presence at Sinai (Ex. 40.35) and on the mount of transfiguration (Mk. 9.7: Mt. 17.5; Lk 9.34). It describes the power of the presence of God. Likewise the word translated "come upon" is the Greek word, *eperxomai*, which is used in Acts by Jesus to describe the empowerment of the disciples by the Holy Spirit (Acts 1.8). Both words are used to describe God's empowering presence. Thus, while the subject and spirit of the conversation is profoundly intimate, Gabriel uses the same words as are used in describing God's

empowerment of Moses and the apostles. Gabriel speaks to her with great dignity, affection and honor. Mary is neither violated nor subordinated in any way. That tone establishes the context in which Mary's response at the end of the story is to be interpreted. Mary's response is often presented as a response of submission and that has been interpreted as her great virtue and this in turn has been taught as the model of feminine submission to male domination. But the spirit of submission is not the spirit of the women of Jesus' genealogy. Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba were strong, courageous women who took charge of their own lives and of their own sexuality and used their sexuality in irregular ways in order to make something positive happen.

You could do a whole series on the stories of these four women. Tamar had been the wife of two of Judah's sons and, because of their wickedness (e.g., the second son, Onan, spilled his semen on the ground rather than give his brother offspring), were put to death by God. (Gen. 38.6-10). Judah didn't want to risk any more of his sons and sent Tamar to her father's home and broke the law of levirate marriage. Tamar was determined to have a child so she put on the clothes of a prostitute, seduced Judah and got pregnant. When Judah was going to have her killed as an adultress, she sent him all the things that he had given her when he hired her as a prostitute. He then acknowledged her righteousness and accepted the child, Perez, who became an ancestor of David. Rahab was a prostitute in Jericho who protected the Israelite spies, became an Israelite, married Salmon and gave birth to Boaz. Ruth was a Moabite, a foreigner who married Boaz after seducing him on the threshing floor at her Israelite mother-in-law's instigation. Bathsheba didn't seduce David but she became his strongest wife who acted decisively to make her son, Solomon, David's successor. These are women who are the opposite of submissive. They are women who are determined to make something of their situation and to make a contribution to the history of salvation. These are Mary's ancestors in Matthew.

That is also the way Mary is presented in Luke who responds with strength and affirmation in response to the Gabriel's announcement of her calling. She is not submissive but rather affirmative. Thus, when she says "Here I am, a handmaid of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word." She's not saying this in a soft, submissive voice with head bowed but rather in a spirit of: "Yes! All right! Lets do it!" It is not "I submit to being used"

but rather, “I affirm what is happening here as the will of God for me.” It’s a very different way of telling the story, and it’s very important in relation to how the role of women is understood. The manner in which this story is told has implications for female sexuality, relationships between men and women and relationship with God.

There are many elements of this story that you can explore such as, for example, the appearance of angels in the traditions of Israel. First of all, it is not normal for angels to appear and when they do, it is always frightening. Thus, the messenger of God appears at the burning bush to Moses. In the story of Balaam and his ass (Judges 22-24), the donkey sees the angel with a flaming sword and stops. Balaam beats him over the head until finally the angel appears and Balaam sees his sword and realizes that the donkey that was saving him. There are other annunciation stories, announcements of births to come. I’ve already mentioned Ishmael and Isaac in Genesis 16 and 18, there’s also the story of the announcement of the birth of Samson in Judges 13:3-5. There are also other stories of angels commissioning people such as Gideon in Judges 6. Angels who are sent by God to deliver important messages transform the lives of those who hear them. It’s always appropriate for people to be afraid when an angel appears, because you never know what the angel may do. As is reflected in the story of Balaam, he is almost killed by the angel. Moses is afraid and takes off his sandals because he is afraid to look at God. After the appearance of the angel, Hagar says, “Have I really seen God and land remained alive after seeing him.” (Gen. 16.13) The assumption in Israelite culture was that if you looked at the face of God, you would die. That too is part of the background of this story.

Another set of stories that you might want to at least be familiar with are the stories of the conception of Alexander and Augustus, both of which circulated widely in the first century. In each case the story is their mothers went into the temple of Apollo and while they were asleep, a snake came and wrapped itself around them and they became pregnant. They were then regarded as children of a god, sons of god. That in turn was a basis for their claiming power because they had been chosen by god to exercise power. Luke is countering the stories of Alexander and Augustus, who ruled by the sword and by establishing an empire of total domination, with the story of Jesus, who ruled by the law of love. He did not become an emperor who

exercised military power and conquered the world. Jesus embodies the spirit of God and transforms the world by his spirit of love and self sacrifice for others.

Another dimension of this story is the transformation of sexuality in the establishment of the intimacy of relationship between God and human beings. Jesus' birth as a child of God establishes the model of intimate, loving relationship between God and people. That's probably the most important thing to convey in the way in which you both tell and interpret this story. The wonder of the annunciation story is Mary's character. She has been a constant source of inspiration throughout Christian history. Mary's courage, strength, and faith are in turn reflected in the character of Jesus, her son.

If you read the commentaries on this story, you will see that many commentators say that this story is not about Mary's psychology nor are there any sexual implications in this story. I understand why those things are said in relation to the doctrinal traditions of the Church about the virgin Mary. But I do not think this is descriptive of what the listeners to this story would have understood because of the connections of this story with the other annunciation and birth stories that were being told in the ancient world, both in the story traditions of Israel and in the wider Hellenistic world. The stories in the Old Testament are explicitly sexual as are the stories of Alexander and Augustus. The Jesus story stands in a evocative relationship to these other birth stories. It is a delightful story that is full of implications for the relationship between God and us.

What does this mean for us today? The impact of this story radiates into every part of our lives, our relationships with God and with each other. God's relationship with us is seen in his relationship with Mary. God invites her into a full and open partnership of love for the redemption of the lowly. At the core of that partnership is a transformation of the role of our sexuality. Rather than a source of domination, manipulation, and conflict, our sexuality is the means of God's grace in which God offers to Mary and she agrees with dignity that her body will be the means of God's bringing to birth new life and hope for the world. This is the model for our relationships with each other as men and women, as parents and children, as married and

celibate. As with Mary, so also we are offered the transformation of our bodies and our relationships with one another as a holy and living sacrifice to God.