

## THE WORD BECOMES FLESH

When our oldest son was ten years old, Andrew asked me, “Dad, when I have finished playing basketball for the North Carolina Tarheels and my NBA professional basketball career is over, do you want me to become a minister?” Let me interject that, as his parent and one of his basketball coaches, I knew he was a good basketball player, but I also knew that he was not a great basketball player. Nevertheless, I encouraged him to dream his dreams knowing that, in time, he would come to the realization that he would not play for UNC or have a pro career.

While these thoughts quickly passed through my mind, his question – “Do you want me to become a minister?” - still hovered awaiting my answer. I thought for a moment and then I said to him, “Not especially.” His face dropped and his voice had a hint of disappointment when he asked his next question, “Why don’t you want me to become a minister, Dad?” I replied, “Honey, if you feel that God is calling you to be a minister, I will be very proud and extremely happy. But, I don’t want you to think that you have to go into the ministry because it’s the family business. In order to be a minister, you need to feel that you are called by God, because that sense of call will see you through all of the difficult times in the ministry. If you don’t have a call from God, the ministry can be very hard. Andrew, if you are feeling called by God, then I rejoice. But, if you don’t feel called by God to be a minister, that’s okay as well. I will always be proud of you!” And, he seemed satisfied with my answer.

While that sense of being called is vital to the ministry, it is certainly not limited to just the ministry. I assume that most people feel called to do what they do. I know from personal experience that teachers feel called to teach. Lawyers feel drawn to administer the law and to assist others involved with legal matters. Doctors, nurses, therapists, and many others in health-related areas feel called to help people stay well and active as much as possible. Police, fire, and rescue personnel are called to protect and serve others. Parents exhibit a sense of call as they love, nurture, and raise their children. Whatever our calling in life, we need that sense of being called in order to sustain our commitment and fulfill our responsibilities.

In the Gospel lesson from Luke, Mary is called by God (via the angel Gabriel) to bear not just a son but also the Son of the Most High. It is a strange and unexpected visitation and an even stranger message, but the call from God enabled Mary to have faith in the midst of something that seemed so impossible and to fulfill her high calling in life.

This passage of Scripture, which is known as “the Annunciation”, literally means the announcement. In other words, the angel Gabriel told Mary what was about to happen. Gabriel didn’t ask Mary whether she would consent to be the mother of God in human flesh. Gabriel laid out the divine plan and informed Mary that she was God’s “go-to” person. Before too long, Mary would conceive, and nine months later, Mary would bear a son and name him Jesus. Gabriel proclaimed and predicted the greatness of this one born to Mary. “He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

Mary listened intently to the Word of God, while (like so many others before and after) she thought of a rebuttal. After Gabriel’s announcement, Mary asked, “How can this be?” Gabriel

addressed Mary's confusion by instructing her that the Holy Spirit would overshadow her; therefore, the child to be born would be holy – fully God and fully human. Jesus would be Mary's (and Joseph's) son while at the same time, he would be called Son (capital S!) of God. Furthermore, Mary was given a sign: her elderly relative Elizabeth, who was said to be barren, was now in her sixth month of pregnancy; she too would bear a son (who we know as John the Baptist!). Gabriel topped off the heavenly message with the reminder that “nothing will be impossible with God!”

This closing statement enabled Mary to say, “Yes!” to God: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” In humble obedience, Mary adopted God's vision as her own. She was offering a place where God might come and dwell and bring forth new life. Mary gave herself totally and without reserve into God's hands. She finally felt called by God and she committed her whole being – body, mind, and soul – to provide a home for God in the flesh within her womb. According to Dr. William Barclay, Mary had learned to forget the world's most common prayer – “Thy will be changed” – to pray the world's greatest prayer – “Thy will be done.”

In Luke's earlier story concerning the angel Gabriel's visit to Zechariah (and Elizabeth), and now with Mary, the angel came to announce what God was doing through them. Their job was not to make something happen but to be in alignment with what was already happening by the grace of God. The Word of God was becoming flesh – within their flesh.

With regard to Mary, Luke intended to portray Mary as the first of the disciples, the first person to hear the call of God, believe the good news of the Gospel, and respond affirmatively to that call with faith and obedience. She was committed to living out her call. Mary wasn't entirely sure what all of the divine announcement meant or how it would impact her life in the years to come, and yet, she was ready and willing to be used in the work of God.

The Eastern Church within the body of Christ knows Mary by the designation of theotokos, which is Greek for “the God bearer.” Mary was the one chosen (why? only God really knows) to carry, give birth to, and raise the Son of God. Not only did the Word of God become flesh in Jesus, the Word also became flesh in Mary's own flesh as she bore the Christ child within her womb and made room for him in her heart.

Likewise, the Word of God becomes flesh within us as we too live out our particular callings with faithful and obedient commitment, just like Mary, the very first disciple. Whatever our calling, when we respond to God, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord,” and pray, “Thy will be done,” then we too are “God bearers” who bear God's love in and to the world. As we live in Christ, Christ lives in us; the Word of God speaks and ministers through us to others. As someone has said, “What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth to his Son if I do not also give birth to him in my time and my culture?” This then is the fullness of time: when the Son of God is begotten in us.” (Meister Eckhart, Pulpit Resource, December 1999, p. 50)

God has called us to be God bearers and Good News bearers to this hurting and darkened world. Will we commit ourselves to that call and live our lives on purpose? As with Mary, we have a choice. She could have said no but she didn't; she gave herself totally to the will of God to bear the Christ child. That same choice is before us as well. These two illustrations properly depict the options before us.

A hungry child in a city slum prayed earnestly one Christmas for some food and toys, but nothing happened. She related this to a cynical friend, who asked with a sneer: “What

happened to this God of yours? Why didn't he hear and answer you?" To which the child answered simply: "Oh, I'm sure he did hear me and told someone to bring me a Christmas gift, but I guess they just forgot." More often than not, this is where the breakdown occurs: not with the God who makes the motion, but with us, who hear so faintly and forget so quickly. In a similar situation, Mary said, "Yes, yes, I second the motion. Let it be to me as you have spoken." (John Claypool, Lectionary Homiletics, December 1996, p. 33)

Here's the other option. A church schoolteacher once asked her students to define the word "saint." When no answer was forthcoming, she chose one of the children at random. "Jimmy," she asked, "What is a saint?" Jimmy was no theologian, but his parents brought him to church regularly and always pointed out the pictures of the saints in the beautiful stained glass windows in the sanctuary. "A saint," he answered, "Is someone that the light shines through."

That is our high calling, and may we be totally committed to fulfilling the divine purpose. Whatever we do, let the Word of God become flesh in us, and may the light of Christ shine through us and bring light and hope to this world. Let us join Mary as one of the God bearers, who share God's love, embrace our neighbors, and nurture each other – all to the glory of God the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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