

Advent 4B—Luke 1:26-38  
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### Virgin Territory

Mary is not just the posterchild for Advent, not just the one whose portrait adorns our Christmas cards. She is Advent's embodiment, the one who shows us what Advent means, how we are to live its meaning. For Mary is both virgin and mother, awaiting the arrival of a promise that she had no part in creating. And that is what we are to be too.

That may seem strange to many of us, as strange, I suppose, as the notion of a virgin mother. But that paradox reveals for us our uneasiness with our place in the Christmas story.

To show what I mean, consider the practice of contemplation. A mainstay of Medieval spirituality, it fell out of fashion with the stress in modern times on reason and industry. But a decade or so ago, it reemerged, becoming all the rage in mainline Christian circles. Lots of people were engaged in contemplation, writing books about it, going on contemplative retreats. It seemed like a nice idea alright...until you tried it. What a lot of books don't tell you about is the terror. Sitting there, in silence, no distractions, no to-do list, nothing to do but think and pray... the initial optimism can quickly give way to fear, fear that this doing nothing, this being, this opening oneself up to God, cannot possibly be enough. It all seems so passive. Do something, produce, perform, earn your keep, the voice inside us says. Don't just sit there. It may be good and well for others, the saintly types, to wait for God. But there are things that need doing, and they aren't getting done just sitting here. Contemplation, we quickly discover, requires a radical belief few of us today possess. This is so different from what we are used to

. You see, what matters in the deep experience of contemplation is not the doing and accomplishing. What matters is relationship, the being with, making space within us, within our lives, within our hearts, to receive God, to bear him. Bear him, in both the sense of carrying him and in the sense of delivering him to the world. And we do this, not by doing but by believing, by loving the mysterious Infinite One who stirs us within, who grows inside us and kicks his heels against our innards.

I'm speaking metaphorically here, of course, about our bearing God in us. But before it was a metaphor, it was a literal fact for Mary. The angel summoned Mary, probably thirteen years old and betrothed to Joseph, and told her she would be the mother of the Most High. And she said OK. She offered herself, offered space within her for God to dwell and be born into the world.

We should not gloss over how odd, how strange, how dangerous this would be for her. Besides giving birth to a child, which for the vast majority of women throughout history is a risky endeavor, but also she knew as well as we do that this was not normal, it didn't fit how things were supposed to work, and likely would lead to her ostracization and maybe even death. In saying Yes to the angel, to God, she was leaving the rather safe place of conventional wisdom to enter a realm where few of the old rules would make much sense. In other words, she entered

“virgin territory.” She was on her own there. No one else could judge for her the vitality and validity of her experience. She can measure her reality against scripture, the teachings of her tradition, her reason and intellect, and the counsel of wise friends and family. But finally it is up to her. The redemption of the world is resting on the consent, the choice of this mortal woman to believe fearlessly that what she is experiencing is true. And to claim and live out that truth by conceiving the fruit of her faith, in conceiving salvation.

It's crazy to think about what would have happened had Mary said No. I suppose she could have, if she chose not to risk her reputation, her health, her life. Then again, as difficult as the choice may have been two thousand years ago, if the visit of the angel were to happen today, it's not likely Mary would have been given the choice. As Malcolm Muggeridge observed, in our day, with family-planning clinics offering convenient ways to correct “mistakes” that might disgrace a family name, “It is, in point of fact, extremely improbable, under existing conditions, that Jesus would have been permitted to be born at all. Mary’s pregnancy, in poor circumstances, and with the father unknown, would have been an obvious case for an abortion; and her talk of having conceived as a result of the intervention of the Holy Ghost would have pointed to the need for psychiatric treatment, and made the case for terminating her pregnancy even stronger.”

Mary, though, whose motherhood was unplanned, had a different response. She heard the angel out, pondered the repercussions, and replied, “I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said.” Often a work of God comes with two edges, great joy and great pain, and in that matter-of-fact response Mary embraced both. And she could do so because she was a virgin. Literally that was true, but more importantly she was a virgin in the sense of being pure of heart, whole in herself, uncompromised, not perforated by the concerns of the conventional norms and authority, but single-mindedly focused on God. To be virgin, then, is in a sense to be a contemplative, one who waits for God, who makes space for Him, who doesn’t allow other concerns or affairs to fill up one’s mind and heart. A virgin is one who keeps space open for God.

While this openness might appear to be passive, it is worth noting that “conceive” is an active verb. Its Latin root means “to seize, to take hold of.” Because Mary is a contemplative, because she is a virgin, because she has kept room for God, she is able to conceive, to take hold of God. In the verses that follow our lesson, Elizabeth, in whom John the Baptist leaps for joy at the approach of Christ, exclaims, “Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you from the Lord would be fulfilled.” And blessed are all virgins, male and female, who believe that there will be fulfillment of what is spoken to them by the angelic messengers of grace.

While Mary’s consent is certainly important, the fact is that Mary doesn’t make the Incarnation happen, or really contribute anything to its fulfillment. God does it all. And if you look at all of the other major events in biblical history, the same is true—the salvation of Noah’s family, Moses’ confrontation with Pharaoh, the choice of David as king, Israel’s release from captivity in Babylon—all God’s exclusive doing. The role of humans was simply to say, Yes. Let it be. Jess said, “Without me you can do it.” (John 15:5) Yet how often do we act as though without us God can do nothing. We think we have to make Christmas come, which is to say we think we have to bring about the redemption of the universe on our own, when all God needs is some space to act, a place of safety, a willing womb. “Oh, but nothing will get good done,” we say. “If

I don't do it, Christmas won't happen, the food won't be cooked, the presents won't be bought, the decorations won't be hung." And so we crowd out the Christ-child with our fretful fears.

In making room for Christ to be born not just in us, God asks us to give away everything of ourselves. The greatest gift that we can offer God and the world is not our skills, our abilities, our possessions. The wise men had their gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Peter and Paul had their preaching. The shepherds brought their lambs. Mary offered only space, love, and belief. What is it that delivers Christ into the world? Is it preaching, art, writing, scholarship, working for justice? Those are all gifts worth sharing. But preachers lose their charisma, scholarship grows pedantic, a more just society alone cannot save us. In the end, when all other human gifts have reached their limit, it is the contemplative one, the bold Virgin in love with God who makes a sanctuary of her life, who delivers Christ, who then delivers us.

That is what it means to live Advent, what it means to be "virgin"—it means leaving open space in our lives for God to enter in and be born in us. This can be a challenge to be sure. For many of us, making room is like clearing out a house that belonged to a hoarder—so much to get rid of. And when you get it all cleared away, what you have is openness, emptiness, nothing to fill the space...or fall back on. Few of us are willing to try that, to risk it. I mean, what if, in sharing your faith, you were to leave behind your briefcase of notes and arguments for belief, put aside your honed skills and knowledge of the Bible, leave the Christmas decorations up in the attic, and go to someone in need and say, Here, all I have is Christ? Would you risk it to find out that is enough?

I'll do you one better. Imagine a Christmas service where the worshippers come in their holiday finery only to find a sanctuary empty of all the glittering decorations, silent of Christmas carols. The church decoration committee on break, the extra choir rehearsals called off and the church's school pageant cancelled. Imagine if tonight members, neighbors and visitors all come and sit in the bare pews, amid plain walls and silent organ, and then someone stands up and says, "Something happened here while we were all out shopping, while we were baking cookies and fretting about whether we bought our brother-in-law the right gift: *Christ was born. Christ is here*"? We wouldn't need the glorious choruses and the procession and the bell choir and the organ to make it real. We wouldn't need the tree strung with lights. We wouldn't have to reconcile the hope of Christmas with a world whacked by sin and evil. There wouldn't be any need to explain how Mary was really a virgin *and* a mother. And no one would have to preach sermons to work up faith in it all.

All of that would seem gaudy and shallow in comparison to the fullness of that empty sanctuary. Hushed and awed, we would kneel together in the stillness. Peace would settle over the planet like a coverlet drawn over a sleeping child. And the world would discover itself held in the womb of the Mother of God, even as we are filled with all God's fullness. And all without us having to make it so. We would have only to receive it, to say, Yes. As Mary said, Let it be.

Making room, readying ourselves to receive Christ, to conceive him, and bear him in the world—this is how we are to prepare for Christmas. It is how Mary prepared for Jesus' arrival. Just as Mary did nothing to make the Incarnation happen, we cannot really *make* Christmas happen either, but we can *receive* it. We can receive it, receive him, make him room. Yes, this is

“virgin territory” for a lot of us. We are used to making things happen. But living Advent is not about *doing* something, it’s about *being* something special. So, be a vessel. Be a womb. Be a dwelling for God. And be prepared to be surprised. Amen.