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The Gospel of Luke
II. The Faith of Mary
Luke 1:26-38

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In my last year of seminary, I attended something called a “Face-to-Face” event. It took place at a hotel specifically booked for the event, and basically what happened was that all the churches in that region looking for a new pastor gathered in the same place as all the pastors looking for a new church – or, in my case, a first church. It was horrible. But one memory of that event still stands out. I knocked on the door of one of the hotel rooms to interview with the search committee of a small church in the Shenandoah Valley. There were only two chairs in the room – so most of the committee was sitting on the beds. There was one chair, of course, for me to sit in – the hot seat. And the other chair, almost blocking my entrance into the room, was occupied by Methusaleh¹, or at least one of his female descendants. I knocked, opened the door – and there she was. There was no greeting, no hello, no we’re glad to meet with you. None of that for her. Instead, she fixed me with a stern look and issued her challenge: “*Young man, do you believe in the Virgin Birth?*” This was clearly a pass/fail question. I said that I did. And only then did she smile and welcome me in and let me sit in my chair.

I have never really had trouble with the Virgin Birth as an article of faith, though I have known some who have struggled to believe in it. It has just always seemed to me that if God can create the heavens and the earth and all that dwells therein, then it really was probably no big deal for him to bypass the ordinary means of human procreation in the case of Jesus – especially since God is also the one who invented the means of human procreation! The thing that I find most fantastic and challenging about the Virgin Birth is not “how” the Son of God came to be conceived within Mary’s womb, but rather that Mary would so fully, so quickly, and so faithfully consent to God’s call to allow Jesus to be conceived in her. That she would be able to so quickly say – to something that would so dramatically change the course of her life – so readily to be able to say, “*Let it be to me according to your word.*” What amazes me about the Virgin Birth is the faith of Mary.

Think about it for a moment. Hard enough, don’t you think, even to take in what the angel is telling you – though I suppose should an angel visit us in the fashion Gabriel visited Mary, we would at least be rather intently interested in whatever was going to be said. But Mary, taking all this in, even awed by Gabriel’s appearance, still had to be thinking in the back of her mind about what saying “yes” to all this was going to mean for her, from a very practical perspective. Thinking how inconvenient, if not downright difficult, the consequences of what the angel was asking was going to be for her. Mary had enough sense to be able to ask Gabriel about how this was going to happen – which tells me she was clear-headed enough also to be thinking about how her parents

were going to react when she began to show her pregnancy while claiming still to be a virgin. How her fiancé Joseph was going to respond when she assured him with a belly out to here that she had never been near another man. How the neighbors were going to gossip – the suspicious looks she would receive in the marketplace, as well as the questions openly raised about her character and morality.

Not to mention how all of this was going to upset the plans she had no doubt made for herself and for her life, the dreams she had kept about how her life would unfold with Joseph and about where her happiness would be found. All of this, surely, running through Mary's mind as she as she listens to what Gabriel says the Lord intends for her. Mary had to know, in that moment, how very hard this was all going to be if she were to consent to what Gabriel was saying, agree to what God wanted to do in and through her. And yet, when the angel is finished, she answers: *"I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."* That's what I find hard to grasp about the Virgin Birth – the extraordinary faith of Mary.

I can't help but wonder what I would have said if I were in Mary's place. Mary said, *"Let it be to me according to your word"* – my fear is that the best I would have come up with, and this on a good day, would have been more along the lines of *"I believe, but help my unbelief."*² Not an unconditional, unhesitating "yes" like that of Mary, but more of a "Let me sit on this a bit and I'll get back to you maybe later" sort of a response. What would you have said? If God were to send an angel to stand in front of you the moment you get home today, asking you to let Him completely turn your life upside-down, make it much harder and yet also much deeper than it currently is, ask you to exchange all your personal dreams and schemes for the dreams and schemes God has instead chosen for you – what would you say? How would you answer? I just don't know if I have the faith of Mary in me yet, do you? Although I suspect none of us can really know the true measure of our faith until we find ourselves in just such a situation, when our faith is truly tested.

But, here's the thing – in a very real sense, we are in Mary's position already. In fact, we are in Mary's position every single day. Ever since Mary gave birth to her Son, and ever since He lived and taught and died and rose again, and ever since we first said our own personal "yes" to His initial offer of amazing grace and became one of His disciples – we, in a sense, have been continually in the place of Mary. For what God asked of Mary is, in a sense, what God keeps asking also of us. That we should surrender self and yield to His plans for us. That He should be allowed to abide in us as our Lord, not just as our Savior. That His will should overshadow ours – something of the way in which the Holy Spirit overshadowed Mary – so that He may take up residence within, not our wombs, but certainly within our hearts and minds and spirits. That Christ should be born not just in Mary, not just in Bethlehem once upon a time, but born in us anew daily.

I mean, just listen to Jesus saying that we must die to self before we can truly begin to live in Him. Listen to Jesus praying, *"Not my will, Father, but thine be done"*³ – and realizing that this is exactly the same prayer He taught us to pray and which we so carelessly pray together on Sunday mornings: *"Thy kingdom come; thy will be done"*⁴ – in us, in our lives right now, in our world right here. Not our will, but His! Not what we want, but what He desires to give. Listen to Paul saying, *"I have been crucified to Christ. It is no longer I that live, but Christ who lives in me."*

*To have my voice, but him speaking.
My steps, but Christ leading.
My heart, but his love beating
in me, through me, with me.
What's it like to have Christ on the inside?*

*To tap his strength when mine expires
or feel the force of heaven's fires
raging, purging wrong desires.
Could Christ become my self entire?*

*So much him, so little me
that in my eyes it's him they see.
What's it like to a Mary be?
No longer I, but Christ in me.⁵*

Is that not, in a sense, what God asked of Mary? And is that not also what God is now asking of you and me, who are called by the name of Mary's Son – “*No longer I, but Christ in me*”?

And is not what God asks now of us every bit as difficult, inconvenient, counter-cultural, and somewhat embarrassing to our minds, in our lives, as what God asked of Mary? Saying yes to God meant Mary was embarking on a path that would render her a square peg in the round hole of her village life, of her engagement to Joseph. But isn't God asking the same of us? To become transformed into a square peg fitting into His Kingdom, instead of being conformed to the round hole of this world, this culture, this village around us? One of my favorite Frederick Buechner quotes says it all – and says it quite honestly and forcefully:

If the world is sane, then Jesus is mad as a hatter and the Last Supper is the Mad Tea Party. The world says, Mind your own business, and Jesus says, There is no such thing as your own business. The world says, Follow the wisest course and be a success, and Jesus says, Follow me and be crucified. The world says, Drive carefully – the life you save may be your own – and Jesus says, Whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. The world says, Law and order, and Jesus says, Love. The world says, Get, and Jesus says, Give. In terms of the world's sanity, Jesus is crazy as a coot, and anybody who thinks he can follow him without being a little crazy too is laboring less under the cross than under a delusion. “We are fools for Christ's sake,” Paul says, faith says – the faith that ultimately the foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of men, the lunacy of Jesus saner than the grim sanity of the world.⁶

And yet Mary says “yes”: “*I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.*” Is the faith of Mary just another of those unrepeatable Christmas miracles, those once upon a time things like the star in the sky and the angel host singing above the shepherds? Or can

it be ours, also – the faith of Mary? Can that same willingness, openness, trust, and assent to God live within me? Live within you?

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”⁷

“Let it be to me according to your word.”

“You cannot serve both God and money . . . Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow . . .”⁸

“Let it be to me according to your word.”

“Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.”⁹

“Let it be to me according to your word.”

“If anyone would come after me, let him take up his cross and follow me.”¹⁰

“Let it be to me according to your word.”

Can this faith, the faith of Mary, truly take root and grow within our hearts and our minds?

Yes, says Mary’s Son. A thousand times yes – by the power of His grace at work within us. His disciples, remember, upon hearing Him converse with the rich young ruler – who went away sad – ask Jesus, “*Then who can be saved?*” And He answers them, with words and with a promise which speak to us still: “*What is impossible with human beings is possible with God.*”¹¹ What we, on our own, could never do, Christ can and will do in us – if we will let Him. What Christ intends to do in us, Christ also promises to do for us. For the real miracle of Christmas is not the fact of the Virgin Birth. The real miracle of Christmas is that the Holy Child born of Mary’s womb, born of Mary’s faith, has enabled us all to be reborn¹² – born again, born anew, born from on high. Even now enabling us to become, like Him, “*children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.*”¹³ He can and will enable us to say it, to mean it, to believe it, to live it: “*Let it be to me according to your word.*” Say it with me: “*Let it be to me according to your word.*” Say it again: “*Let it be to me according to your word.*” Say it this time as if it were a prayer we are offering up to God: “*Let it be to me according to your word.*” Let’s keep saying that together, praying that together – the faith of Mary – until, together:

*To have my voice, but him speaking.
My steps, but Christ leading.
My heart, but his love beating
in me, through me, with me . . .
No longer I, but Christ in me.*

¹ Genesis 5:25-27.

² Mark 9:24.

³ Luke 22:41-42.

⁴ Matthew 6:10.

⁵ Max Lucado, Next Door Savior (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003), p. 92.

⁶ Frederick Buechner, The Faces of Jesus (New York: Stearn/Harper & Row, 1989), p. 136.

⁷ Matthew 5:43-44.

⁸ Matthew 6:33-34.

⁹ Matthew 7:13-14.

¹⁰ Matthew 16:24.

¹¹ Matthew 19:25-26.

¹² See John 3:1-8.

¹³ John 1:12-13.