

## All Creation Waited...

There are certain moments in history when the course of human events seemed to depend on the single choices of certain people. These choices are like historical hinges on which the future turns. One example I can think of involves our first president, / George Washington. You probably know the story. After he led his rag tag band of soldiers to victory against the mighty British Empire, the people were ready to crown him King of America. Washington had a choice: to accept the will of the people and be king or to decline. Washington decided the last thing this new country needed was another King George and he declined. How that decision affected history, not only the history of America but the history of all the world! What if Washington had said yes? How would the last 200 years of history have been different. History hung on the hinge of that one decision.

In the Christmas story there is another choice that had even greater impact on the world. It was made by a young teenage girl. Her name was Mary. / *In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. / The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God (Luke 1:26-28).*

/ What a remarkable story. The extraordinary Gabriel meets with an ordinary maiden to deliver an anything but ordinary message from God. Why Mary? We know next to nothing about her. She's a young girl from Nazareth pledged to be married to a man named Joseph. That's it. No reason is provided in the Scriptures for why she should be so "highly favored" by God. In many ways she is like the patriarch Abraham who suddenly appears in Scripture unknown to us except for his name and his town. Neither appears with great fanfare, neither has impressive credentials, yet both are chosen for unprecedented blessing. One is chosen to be the father of a nation; the other chosen to be the mother of the Savior.

There is a lesson here about God's grace. Did Mary deserve such favor? Surely she must have been very faithful, an exemplary daughter of Sarah to be chosen for such honor. Maybe. Probably. But apparently it is not important that we know. In fact we just don't know that much about Mary. Why? You'd think the mother of Messiah would merit more press than that. Perhaps we don't know much more of Mary because God does not want us to make much more of Mary than we should. / Years ago the "Pieta," Michaelangelo's statue of Mary holding the lifeless body of her crucified son in her arms, was defaced by a reckless vandal. The figure of Mary was damaged. One writer has said that this attack is a kind of parable of what the Christian Church has done to Mary over the years. We've damaged her image. Some in the Catholic church have almost idolized her while

most in the Protestant church have nearly ignored her altogether. To the former she is the “magnificent Mary,” Mother of God. To the latter she is “merely Mary,” a figurine in a nativity scene. The truth is she is “simply Mary,” a common girl who suddenly finds herself face to face with an uncommon Gabriel who presents her with an anything but common proposal. / *You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. / The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end (Luke 1: 31-33).*

/ No woman in Israel could be more blessed. To be “with child” was the hope of every maiden; to be barren every maiden’s fear. To “have a son” was an even greater blessing in those days. But to give birth to the son who would grow up to sit on the “throne of David” was the cherished dream of every daughter of Abraham, for he who sat on that throne would be none other than the long awaited Messiah. Here in this brief angelic moment Mary discovers she is thrice blessed, far beyond anything she could ever have dared to hope. Yet, even in the glow of this revelation, there is a delicate problem. Mary is not married. She is a virgin. “How can this be, she asks?” The angel answers. / *The Holy Spirit will come upon you, the power of the Most High will overshadow you so the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. / Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God (Luke 1:35-37).*

/ Here is a great mystery beyond anyone's explanation. Gabriel tells Mary her pregnancy will not be the result of normal relations between a man and a woman, but instead a miraculous conception by the power of the Holy Spirit. There was no precedent for this in Israel's history. It is true that God had miraculously enabled the barren wombs of Sarah and Hannah to give birth to Isaac and Samuel. And soon Mary would confirm God had done the same for her kinswoman, Elizabeth and the birth of John the Baptist. But these miracles had not been done without husbands. No child had ever been conceived like this before, born not just of a barren woman but of a virgin. Mary was to give birth to a son born not of a husband's will but born of God. Gabriel explains why this birth had to be different. This Holy Child was to be called not just a son of man, but "the Son of God." If the Son of God was to also be the Savior of the World at least two conditions had to be met. First he would have to be "one of us," or as the writer of Hebrews states, one who shares our flesh and blood.

*/ Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death --that is, the devil-- and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. / For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants. For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, / and that he might make*

*atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted. (Hebrews 2:14-18)* Jesus was one of us; he shared our humanity.

But in another sense he had to be completely different from us, totally without sin, so that he could be both the perfect priest and the perfect sacrifice for us. The writer of Hebrews goes on to say, */ Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. / For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are -- yet was without sin. / Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need (Heb 4:14-16).*

*/ As the son of Mary, Jesus was qualified to be our replacement, giving his life for ours, offering his death instead of our own. As the Son of God, he was authorized to be our redemption, giving his life for ours, offering his death instead of our own. The apostle describes it this way, / God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:21).*

*/ In C. S. Lewis' classic story, The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe Lewis gives his own narrative version of this biblical truth. / There is a scene in which the great Lion Aslan meets with the evil white witch. The witch reminds Aslan that there is a deep magic in Narnia. She says "Every traitor belongs to me as my lawful*

prey and for every treachery I have a right to kill.” Edmund, one of the children in the story, has betrayed his friends and thus forfeited his life to the witch. Aslan offers his life in Edmund’s place, which the witch gladly accepts, and / Aslan is sacrificed at the place of execution called the “Stone Table.” As Aslan would explain to the children later, what the witch did not know was that there was an even deeper magic which existed even before there was a Narnia. It states, / “When a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in the traitor’s stead, the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backward.”

Such theological understanding of the cross and its ultimate meaning for the salvation of all mankind was a mystery far beyond the young girl from Nazareth. To her the matter was much simpler, terrifyingly simpler. God had chosen her to have a child without a husband. There was no mystery about that. There could be no greater shame or scandal for a Jewish girl than to be with child and without a husband. And Gabriel made no promise to provide an explanation to her family and all the town’s people. To accept this divine proposal meant almost surely she would also have to accept shame and rejection and perhaps worse.

So, here is one of those moments in history, when the future of all hinges on the decision of one, in this case one young girl. What will she do? Some of the ancient church Fathers have written about this moment saying that / all creation stood breathless waiting for Mary’s reply. No one had ever been asked to do such a

thing, and no one would ever be asked to do so again. For there is only one Savior by whom all men can be saved, and so there can only be one mother of that Savior. It was indeed a critical moment for all of God's creation. Perhaps you notice the similarity to another critical moment in history when another woman was visited by an angel and was faced with another terribly important choice. All creation waited breathlessly for her decision as well. / Mother Eve in the Garden was also visited by an angel, a fallen angel named Lucifer. He came to Eve not so she would know God's favor, but so that she would doubt it. He presented Eve with a choice, in a way history's first choice, whether or not to believe and trust in God. Eve chose and with that choice she changed the world forever and became the mother of sinful humanity. From that choice on, every child born to woman would be born under the curse of sin. / Now, thousands of years later, in Nazareth, Mary has opportunity to reverse the choice in Eden, and give birth to one who will break sin's curse. What will she do? After an eternity's pause, Mary gives her answer. / *I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said* (Luke 1:38).

And on the hinge of that decision, history turned. All mankind would be given the choice to turn as well, to turn back to God. Young Mary made the choice that Mother Eve did not. She chose to believe God no matter what. Later in this story, Mary's kinswoman Elizabeth, describes why the choice Mary made was so wonderful. / *Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will*

*be accomplished* (Luke 1:45). Like Abraham, Mary believed God and placed her life at risk by doing so. Martin Luther once said there are three great miracles in the Christmas story: the miracle of God becoming a man, the miracle of the virgin birth and the miracle that Mary believed God. Luther also said of the three, the latter one was the greatest.

We celebrate in this season the wonder of Mary's choice. We celebrate it partly because of the world-changing consequences of her choice. But in a very real sense, her choice is not so different from choices you and I are called to make every day. / Like Mary, we are challenged every day to believe, really believe God. To believe he exists. To believe he loves. To believe his will is best for us. To believe that somehow God became the son of man so that we could become the children of God. To believe that Jesus, the Son of Man, is now the Lord of Lords and that all authority in heaven and on earth has been give to him alone. To believe that one day he will return to judge the whole earth. To believe that whether we spend an eternity of bliss in heaven or are eternally destroyed in hell comes down to whether or not we believe this Son of Man was the Son of God.

We too have received a message delivered from God miraculously preserved for us in the Bible, a message that challenges us no less than Gabriel's message challenged Mary. We are invited to live as we believe; to live according to God's way and not our own. We are invited to choose a life of truth rather than deception,

holiness rather than sin, obedience rather than rebellion. Often the choice seems hard, for the way of God is narrow; it is often not the way we would naturally choose to go. And sometimes it's just hard to believe it's all really true. It's hard to believe that if we choose to deny ourselves the pleasures of sin, if we choose to set the needs of others above our own, if we choose to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, that in the end it will all be worth it, God will be faithful, life will be better. If we choose to believe.

Mary is our model. She was blessed because she believed what the Lord said he would accomplish. Do we have Mary's faith? If we choose to believe as she believed, we do. And we too will be blessed. Will our daily decisions become another hinge in history? Will our choice to believe God have the same consequences as Mary's choice? It will for us and who knows who else!

/ A few years before Dad died he received a letter from a man who had been a fellow graduate student at TCU in the early 60s. It was an extraordinary letter. The man told how he had recently decided to become a Christian. He had never believed growing up but had recently become convinced to put his faith in Christ. The decision had brought difficult consequences and complications into his life, especially with his children who had also been raised not to believe in God. But he was happy with his decision and hopeful that one day he would be able to convince his children as well. But the reason he was writing to dad was because it was dad's

life that had led to this decision, even so many years later. Even though this man did not believe, the witness of dad's life of faith had remained with him all these years. He could not set it aside easily. Dad's life created the lingering doubt that helped finally to enable this man's faith. And so he wrote to thank him. I don't know what choices dad made that had such an impact on this man, but apparently it did. That's what our choices do. They change the world. But most importantly, our choices change us!

Just as Mary's choice resulted in Christ being formed within her, so our choices allow Christ to be formed within us. And as the Christ within us grows up into us, we are changed and we become Christ in this world. The mysterious incarnation happens all over again. The Word of God becomes flesh again, this time our flesh. By faith the conception of Nazareth and the birth of Bethlehem happens again in us. Once again Christ comes into the world, but only if we follow the courageous and faithful example of the young girl Mary. Only if our reply is the same as hers when she said to the angel, *I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said.* / All creation waits for your reply.