

## This Baby Changes Everything

Luke 1:26-55

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Christopher Hitchens died this week. He was a brilliant academic and a fearless critic of some of the world's most favorite characters, including Mother Teresa, whom he characterized as a fraudulent, fanatic fundamentalist. But he became most famous, perhaps, not for these scathing biographies, but for his 2007 book, *God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. Many have named him as one of the fathers of the "new atheism" movement, but Hitchens did not characterize himself as an atheist, because he said an atheist could not believe in God but wish that belief in God were correct; instead, he characterized himself as an "antitheist", one who, in his words, "is relieved that there's no evidence" for God. He famously argued that God is like a horrible dictator from whom you can never escape, since his reign is everlasting and over all the earth. And who would want *that* to be true?

I find Hitchens' arguments to be quite interesting, if totally unconvincing, but when I read this story of the annunciation, the announcement from the angel Gabriel to the young girl, Mary, that she would bear the Christ-child; when I hear this story of the in-breaking of love into the world in such a gentle yet powerful way, I wonder how someone like Hitchens could believe so strongly in a character of God that I simply have not seen. Especially in this season, as we come to the end of Advent and approach the miracle of Christmas, of Emmanuel, God *with* us, I cannot see the connection between this portrayal of a never-ending dictator and the God of love who chose to make himself known in the body of a child, born by the humblest of parents in a Bethlehem stable.

And it's not just this story: this story of Mary and her relative, Elizabeth, is a beautiful one, a wonderful re-telling of God's interventions in the world. God wanted so much to be with us, when we hid and ran away from God repeatedly, that God humbled Godself and was born as a tiny, helpless baby, seemingly just like any other tiny, helpless baby born. After all, humans bear some of the least-developed babies of all mammals: think about how cows are birthed in the field, and the calves pop up and drink up their mama's milk without any instruction or help, then follow them right off into the pasture, miniature versions of their parents. It takes our kids a year or more to learn how to walk, and even then they are hardly smaller versions of grownups. I digress, but this helps me to think about just how vulnerable a human newborn is: he can do nothing on his own. And that is how God, this supposed "omnipotent dictator," *chose* to be.

But of course, for people of faith, it's not a *total* surprise: God has intervened in human lives many times before, even in the form of a wondrous birth. Remember Isaac, born to parents in their 90's, then helping to father a multitude of generations? Or Samuel, for whom Hannah prayed so earnestly? Or Samson, who was born to a barren mother to save the Israelites from the Philistines? And the holy has broken into our own lives time and again, as well: sometimes in a wondrous birth – more often, in the words of a friend, the hand of a loved one, a perfect sunset flashing off the water.

What's remarkable about this in-breaking of the holy, then, is both Mary's ordinariness and her extraordinariness: she is but a young girl, a teenager, barely past puberty, who is betrothed to a carpenter named Joseph. She isn't royalty. She isn't wealthy. She lives in Nazareth, far from the center of religious life in Jerusalem. The only thing Mary had going for her was that she was engaged to a descendent of King David, about whom the prophets had spoken, saying one of his line

would be the savior of the Israelite people. But that was by marriage; and they weren't even married yet. She's an ordinary girl in an ordinary town, far from any place where exciting things happen.

And yet, the angel Gabriel comes and tells her not once but twice that she is favored by God. Just sit with that for a moment. Close your eyes and imagine yourself, ordinary you in your ordinary neighborhood, where nothing exciting ever happens... and not only does an angel appear, but the angel says, "You have found favor with God." "You're chosen," Gabriel says. "God not only knows about you, but God knows the very depths of your being, and God loves what he sees. God wants you to do something extraordinary." Can you imagine that? "Greetings, favored one," Gabriel begins, to this otherwise totally ordinary girl. It just goes to show that God can work anywhere, through anyone, even the least assuming among us. I dare say this would have been an extraordinary story even if it ended right there, with Gabriel's greeting: "You, Mary, have found favor with God."

But it doesn't end there: most of the time in the Bible, when an angel visits a human with a message, there's a little confusion or protest - Mary asks, "How can this be?" Because even if Palestinians in Jesus' time didn't know about x and y chromosomes and the biological and chemical particularities of conception and childbirth, they knew how babies were made. And Mary wasn't married - she hadn't participated in such activity just yet; and if she *had*, if she had had sex outside of marriage and been found out, she could have been stoned for her adultery. So she was probably pretty serious about her virginity, and her response is a logical question: "How can this be, Gabriel, since I am a virgin?"

Others have protested the angel's words, too. Zechariah didn't believe Elizabeth would bear a son in her old age, barren as she had been for so many years; in fact, the angel had to make Zechariah mute for awhile to silence his objections. This is the trouble with divine intervention: it usually arrives accompanied by human protest. We don't believe it's possible for God to care enough, for God to be close enough, for God to be active enough to make a difference.

But Mary's question was a logical one, and Gabriel had a clear answer: the Holy Spirit will work within you, and God's power will descend and surround you, and nothing is impossible with God." That's all it took. Perhaps Mary already knew that God's presence could make the impossible happen, so a simple mention of the power of the Most High answered all her questions. Perhaps, when the angel mentioned that she would bear the Son of God, it sounded strangely familiar, as if all of life suddenly made sense. Perhaps the angel was simply affirming something she had always known but could not articulate. Or maybe she just believed in a God who had lovingly intervened in human affairs so many times before that it didn't sound outrageous this time.

Whatever it was, Mary wasn't hindered by what others might think of her - she didn't ask Gabriel for protection against social rules that would strongly frown on her being pregnant out of wedlock. She didn't ask for affirmation that her parents wouldn't disown her or Joseph wouldn't leave her. She simply said those famous words, "May it be with me as you have said." "Okay, I'll do it," she says. "I'll bear the Son of God. I'll go through the craziness of pregnancy and the ups and downs of parenthood and give my heart to this whole other person who is only partly mine. I will undergo heartache like I've never known. I'll bear life to the whole world."

Mary reminds us that to be incapable on our own isn't the end of the story: she couldn't make Jesus happen no matter how hard she tried. But she was willing to do her part and let God do the rest. She was willing to open herself to the Holy Spirit, to submit herself to the power of God, trusting that God would hold up the other end of the deal. She was willing to submit herself to the

pains of labor (quite literally), trusting that through God's power, she might participate in the miracle of life in the very broadest sense of the word, for the whole world.

And in all this, Mary realizes that not only is her life about to turn upside-down, but the whole world is about to turn upside-down, too. She goes to celebrate with her relative, Elizabeth, and they sing and dance and clap their hands, because they've believed the prophets' words all along, that one would be sent to save them from the oppression they've experienced under Herod's reign. She knows that the world will never be the same: that the lowly will be lifted up and the proud brought down, the rich sent away empty and the hungry filled with good things. *Everything* is about to change, because God is coming to earth. This is an important contrast to the sweet songs we sing during this season: it isn't a "silent night," when "all is calm and all is bright." It's the beginning of a revolution, a transformation of the whole world. It's important that Mary celebrates the angel's message with *this* song, because it reminds us that while Jesus starts out as a sweet, helpless baby, he will later challenge us in every way, threatening our comfortable lifestyle and our cultural idols. Have you seen those Johnson and Johnson commercials that say, "A baby changes everything?" That's an understatement in this case. *This baby changes everything.* Because this baby is the Word made flesh.

In this last week of Advent, we still have time to prepare. And while you may spend these days in some frantic combination of gift-wrapping and party-hosting and family-managing; or, you may spend these days feeling disappointed and disenchanting with it all... there is still time to remember what the season is about: that nothing is impossible when we invite the Holy Spirit to work through us. The power of God, even in the lives of ordinary people in ordinary towns like ours brings the possibility of things we would otherwise not imagine: things that might transform the world. As this most holy day comes near, let us believe again. Not just in Santa or in miracles or in the beauty of the season: but let us believe in the power of God to come near, to intervene, to lovingly take over and set things right. Amen.