

“A (Very) Young Mother To Be” based on Luke 1:26-45

The Christmas stories function as gospels in miniature: establishing themes, offering foreshadowing, and even telling parts of the story in smaller but parallel ways.¹ One of the little connections I first noticed this year is that in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus travels several times between the seat of his ministry in Galilee and the seat of Jewish power in Judea. This text has his mother Mary traveling from Galilee, to Judea, back to Galilee, and then BACK to Judea all while pregnant!

Luke's themes – in both the Gospel as a whole and in the Christmas story - include a value of women, a focus on the marginalized, and attention to the Holy Spirit. Luke chapter 1 spends a lot of time on Zechariah, Elizabeth, and John the Baptist. Luke is the only gospel to claim that Elizabeth and Mary are kin, as well as the only one to focus on the experiences of Elizabeth and Mary. Scholars have pointed out that Luke is intentionality setting up a rather enormous proposition.

Namely, Elizabeth's pregnancy story sounds like a common Hebrew Bible story. According to Genesis none of the patriarchs and matriarchs were about to procreate without an exceptionally long wait and Divine intervention. Elizabeth and Zechariah are an older couple, without children, who have gone past childbearing age. Elizabeth and Zechariah's story sounds most like Abraham and Sarah's, although it also connotes the birth of Samuel. God intervenes, and the VERY unexpected happen, or at least it would be VERY unexpected if it weren't so common in the Bible.

Mary's pregnancy story, on the other hand, is novel in the Bible. It hasn't been told before. The ancient Greeks and Romans may have had virgin birth stories as commonly as we have superhero movies, but this wasn't part of the Jewish tradition.

Elizabeth is an old woman, thought to be barren, who has a child because of Divine intervention. Her story resounds with Hebrew Bible echoes. Mary is a young woman, thought to be pre-pubescent, who is ALSO said to have a child because of Divine intervention. Her story has an entirely new tune and tone.

Scholars think that Luke is intending for Elizabeth's son, John the Baptist, to represent the end of an age; while Mary's son, Jesus, represents the beginning of another age.² In that case, having the two pregnant mothers residing in the same home in the Judean hills for three months, having Mary present for Elizabeth's birth, having Elizabeth's pregnancy function as proof for Mary's experience, and having the women related to each other and spending time sharing their experiences, is potent with meaning.

Now, it does turn out that the idea of one age ending and another beginning with the births (and deaths) of those men does have some truth to it. After all, a miscalculation of the date of the Birth of Christ was the original premise of our Western Calendar. Time has been calculated since that moment. And, since Luke was writing about 60 years after the death of Jesus³, but the time these stories were written down, the sense of an era ending another beginning was presumably

felt deeply. Setting up these two main characters as the icons of change indicates how important the early Christian community thought their lives were.

Now, there is a reasonably high level of certainty that Jesus was a disciple of John the Baptist AND that there were people who had wondered if John the Baptist was the Messiah. This means that the followers of Jesus – both during his life and after his death – had to explain why they thought THEIR guy was THE guy, and the OTHER guy wasn't. I suspect some of the reason for the story we read today is to clarify that stance. It also serves acknowledge how closely tied their lives were and how closely tied their message were. Today, I think it functions well to remind us that the “end of an era” and the “beginning of an era” still operated in continuity – with a shared understanding of God and of God's vision for the world.

Luke 1 is a chapter of waiting. It runs for 80 verses, and yet it isn't until chapter 2 that Jesus arrives. Luke 1 is a little bit of Advent and of Christmas Eve – the waiting and the not-yet. Luke 1 gets us ready and hungry, and anticipating the arrival of the Christ-child. It makes us wait from the annunciation, through travels and songs of praise, through John the Baptist's birth and circumcision, through the faith struggles of his father, and even through the start of John the Baptist's ministry before the chapter ends and we get to turn to the birth of Jesus.

It feels a bit like we are waiting with Mary, aware of the changes that are about to happen, seeing the changes in her body, wondering about the impact (she's said to ponder a lot), but without yet holding the baby nor forming him in his faith. Luke sets up Mary to be the sort of woman you can believe could raise a son like Jesus. She is named for Miriam, a wise and faithful leader, the sister of Moses.

(Mary is the Greek-i-fied version of the Hebrew Miriam. It isn't clear to me if she would have been called Miriam, but it was written down in Greek as Mary or if the Greek influence was strong enough that she lived in that tension of being named for a Hebrew heroine, but with the itself Greek-i-fied. By the way, the word for that is “grecized” but I didn't think we all knew that. Or, rather, I didn't previously know that.)

Mary is also BRAVE and FIERCE. If you remember a later story of Jesus, the one with the woman who had been accused on adultery, the one they wanted to stone – because that was the prescribed punishment for such an act – then you may note why an engaged woman agreeing to a pregnancy from not-her-fiance was so brave!! An engaged woman was seen as fully the “property” of her husband, and adultery was defined as someone sleeping with someone else's property, and a pregnancy when the couple hadn't engaged in procreative activities would generally serve as good proof of adultery. Yet, in Luke, this isn't a problem!!! For Luke, Mary speaks and is believed, and there isn't any issue at all. I like Luke. He trusts women, and he gives them voice!

In many ways this presentation of Mary becoming pregnant by God reflects the Greek and Roman influence over that region as much as her name does. This was a fairly common story in

Greek and Roman myths, although, I gotta give it to Luke, this is the only story in which the woman is asked for CONSENT before getting pregnant.

Mary DOES give consent. She knows what it could cost, but she is willing. As the story goes on, she sings God's praises for being willing to lift her up by giving her this task ([#tomorrowsSermon](#))

Now, much later in the Gospel, Jesus will be put to death because of his faithfulness to God's message and the building of God's kingdom. However, in this very early passage in Luke 1, we see that his mother was also willing to take those risks in order to serve God and build the kingdom. She was likely very young (on the cusp of puberty), very poor, and rather profoundly disempowered, but she is given a choice about her life and she chooses to take a risk for God's sake.

Elizabeth is also named for a Hebrew heroine, Aaron's wife (Aaron was brother to Moses and Miriam), whose Hebrew name has been translated into Greek. I choose to interpret from this story that Elizabeth was a mentor figure to Mary, a safe place Mary could go and ponder. It has already been said in Luke 1 that John the Baptist was going to be gifted with the Holy Spirit, and in this scene it is clear that the gift is so strong as to move his mother too! Elizabeth is presented as speaking a truth that much of the world will never see, and it is presented as if God's own wisdom is able to move through her.

Elizabeth praises Mary BOTH for the wonder of having Jesus in her womb AND for faithfulness in believing God when she was told what would happen. I appreciate that this praise comes in two parts, too much of Christianity has only praised Mary for being the mother of Jesus, and missed that the story presents her as one of his teachers and mentors as well. Elizabeth expresses shock that she could receive the gift of a visit from such an important woman, and that the baby in her womb recognized the wonder of what was happening.

Luke 1 reminds us why the birth itself even matters! Luke 1 sets us up to notice that when God is up to something, God doesn't tend to pick the already powerful and noteworthy figures to do the work! Luke notes that God works with and through women, and the marginalized, through that unable to be controlled Holy Spirit. Luke sets us up to notice that something BIG is about to happen and it will change the world.

Which perhaps leaves us with a very important question: how has the birth of Christ changed the world FOR US, and how are our lives and actions different because of it? The era we live in has been formed by these stories, and they are ours to ponder. Are we ready, like Mary, to answer the call for radical change with "let it be with me according to your word."? May we be. Amen

1John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg point this out in *The First Christmas: What the Gospels Really Teach about Jesus' Birth* (USA: HarperOne, 2007)

²Fred B. Craddock, Luke in the series Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990) p. 29. This is one of several times this theory has been written, but he said it in a particularly accessible way.

³I'm taking this from the estimate that Luke was written in about 85 CE, while Jesus was born in about 5 BCE, and lived about 31 years. The “mid eighties” guess comes from R. Alan Culpepper, “Luke” in Leadner Keck, ed. , The New Interpreter's Bible (Nashville: Abingdon Press: 1995) p. 8.

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