



What Child This? (Luke 2: 6-19)

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Sometimes when I can't find words for things, I listen to music or I look at pictures. Like one called *Madonna and Child—Boundless Love*, by an artist named Janet McKenzie. She's also the artist of a more famous work called *Jesus of the People*.

What I find captivating about McKenzie's images is that they are unexpected. We have seen so many pictures of idealized Marys and Jesuses.

I think an idealized Jesus would make our lives easier, a Jesus, who sits on a shelf between Monday and Saturday and doesn't hassle us too much in our day-to-day life. Or maybe a hail-Mary-full-of-grace who rests in a gilded frame, delicate and pious—not a Mary who could stand face-to-face with an angel from God or shake her fist at the powers that be.

This Mary could have. That's not to say, she wasn't fearful when she first saw the angel. Everyone, Biblical or otherwise, quakes some when faced with an agent of God. But she got over her fear in short order and stepped up—"Let it be! Game on!"

This Mary could have declared,

"The Mighty One has done great things for me.

He has scattered those with arrogant thoughts and proud inclinations.

He has pulled down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly.

He has sent the rich away empty handed.

He has come to the aid of his people..."

Mary may have been waiting her whole short life to say something like that to the world.

Look--You can see her power. And you can also see, I think, that she is a woman who has a heart big enough to hold lots of experiences of shepherds and angels and prophets and wonder and ponder and treasure. Her heart is generous enough to share the child she holds with the world for the sake of the world.

Generous **and** strong, but this Mary is not all that unusual. The ones God taps never are extra-ordinary. She's a regular peasant girl, preparing to be married in the traditional Jewish way—through a marriage contract, —to an older man.

Yet, when the time comes to step up and do something for the world, she does. Maybe she gains courage from her life experience. Mary knows what it is like to live as a marginalized person. She was a woman in the Ancient Near East where women were property, where women as young as ten could be given away. She lives under Roman occupation. She is part of an oppressed people, subject to the whims of men and rulers. And so she has lessons to teach her son and the Son of God -- about justice and injustice, freedom and oppression, and lots to teach him about class warfare.

Wise **and** loving. Imagine how much she loves this child she shares with God. *I* imagine it's hard even for her to know, really, what kind of child she has birthed. We never know how children are going to turn out. But right now, she doesn't need to understand. She just has to love and nurture the child. There is plenty of love in her face, a fierce love.

And the child. Those eyes.

Although the child nestles into his mother, he also looks out fearlessly as if he senses his home is beyond the frame. The child Jesus belongs to the world and will move in the world and move the world.

Hers may be a love that yearns to hold on tight to her child, but she cannot hold him close or keep him safe for long. This child is not hers alone. He is the Child of God. So she will have to let go and give him up to the world whether she wants to or not. The love she has birthed and the love God has created through her must be released. That's why Jesus was born—that's who he is. He will live among us to share her love and embody God's love in the world.

This letting go will not be easy—look at her hands, they are interlocked. Letting go of grown Jesus will be as painful and beautiful as the giving birth. Mary may cry out as loudly as Jesus walks away from the safety of their home as she did when he left the safety of her womb.

In the end, her heart will be broken. She has known from the start. When an angel from God announced this birth, how could she not know his life would be hard? Then Simeon told her eight days later in the temple. Along with memories of the angel celebration and the shepherd visits, she has held that sadness in her heart. We know she will weep again

as she stands beneath the cross and watches the last bit of life, the life she gave and God gave, slip out of him. She will let go. Her face and her heart hold the beginning and the end.

How can this be? How can Mary give birth and how can she let go?

We can't see everything through this picture, but I think it's safe to say that she **CAN** because she knows that God has been with her from the start. She is God's favored one. The angel told her that too. She knows that God blessed her, and she declared in her first song all generations *will* know that God loved and blessed her. Being favored is not easy.

In the mystery that is God and the beautifully disruptive ways of God, Mary knows that through the uncertainty of her unplanned pregnancy through the joy of beautifully disruptive birthing and nurturing her son through the pain of releasing Jesus into the world for the good of the world through the heartbreak of watching Jesus die God is at her side, God blesses her, God loves her.

God has made something new happen through her.

On this Christmas Day, we remember her story and the child to whom she gave birth—Jesus, child of God, redeemer, prince of peace, source of love and life, fount of every blessing, God with us.

You may wonder why, on this Christmas Day, I didn't talk more about Jesus. After all, it's his birth-day. The beauty of this Christmas Day is that whether or not we are capable of physical birthing or whether or not we have given birth to a child, we can give birth again and again. We are called to a lifetime journey of making space for God's love to bloom wild within our souls. And then we are called to birth this new life from God—Jesus—into the world ourselves. We are called to be like Mary and give God's love—the love we know as Jesus—to the world.

That's the good news we are called to share.

In the 1400's Meister Eckhart, a German mystic asked us all, "What good is it to me if Mary gave birth to the Son of God fourteen hundred years ago and I do not also give birth to the Son of God in my time and in my culture? We are all meant to be Mothers of God."

On this Christmas Day and every day, we **are** meant to be Mary—regular, generous, loving, wise enough, strong when necessary. We are meant to give birth to this child, this Jesus, in the world. Treasure that in your heart. Ponder. Wonder. Do. And fear not.

Amen.

Sources:

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