

Sermon: Mary Overshadowed

Scripture: Luke 1:28-36

Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans

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Visualize this with me for a moment: In ancient Israel in the middle of the Temple was a curtained enclosed area known as the Holy of Holies and in the Holy of Holies sat the Ark of the Covenant, the one that King David danced before in that great procession spoken of in Chronicles 15, and in the ark were the tablets given to Moses of the 10 Commandments, the first covenant between God and the people of Israel. And the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies in the Jerusalem Temple had a solid gold lid and that lid was *overshadowed* by two angels with outstretched wings making what was known as the Mercy Seat and upon the Mercy Seat was where God's presence dwelt in a special way for the communing of the human and the Divine.

During the Second Temple Period in ancient Israel, which lasted from the 6th century BCE until its destruction again by the Roman Empire in 70 CE, the High Priest one time every year, on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, would enter through the curtain veil and into the Holy of Holies to sprinkle blood on the Mercy Seat as a sacrificial offering to Yahweh. And then the High Priest who was in the Holy of Holies which represented the immaterial realm of God would exit through the curtain wearing a seamless robe made from the same fabric as the curtain and the High Priest would emerge from the Holy of Holies as God Godself taking on human form in order to offer forgiveness to the people of Israel. That was the high holy moment of the year and the main event of ancient Israel, and might sound somewhat familiar to you

because it is where our understanding of Jesus Christ and his work in the world came from. Luke makes it clear that that ancient rite was the key for understanding what is happening at the Angel Gabriel's annunciation and the subsequent Virgin Birth.

I know that for some in the post-enlightenment and post-Freudian modern world, that the story of Mary being a virgin can seem a quaint one, hard to believe, if not a relic story of an old patriarchal church teaching that sex is bad and celibacy is good, but there is so much more depth and truth to this story than that. So I invite you to suspend judgment for a moment and consider again this remarkable claim that two thousand years ago there was a pivotal moment in the course of human history when everything changed, when a young Jewish woman of ancient Palestine received an angelic messenger from God and a child was conceived in her womb.

Who is to say that the laws of nature could not have been suspended for such a moment in time. If we hold that there is a Creator God who created this world out of nothing in a big bang moment, then there is nothing illogical at all about the possibility of this God reaching into this dimension and *causing* something that would not have otherwise occurred. As the writer Timothy Keller puts it: "to be sure that miracles cannot occur you would have to be sure beyond doubt that God didn't exist, and that is an article of faith. The existence of God can be neither demonstrably proven or disproven." (Keller, p. 89-90)

So Luke gives us our account of this miracle and in the account he makes it very clear that what happened there with Mary was the historical moment to which the temple sacrificial rite had always been pointing. The High Priests of the temple for hundreds of years were

enacting in a sort of dress rehearsal what was in the fullness of time definitively and actually performed by Mary of Nazareth. Luke references this for his Jewish listeners by using certain words to describe what happened to Mary and one of those words was the Greek word for “overshadowed”. “How will this be?” Mary asks and the Angel Gabriel says “the power of the most high will overshadow you therefore the child to be born will be holy.” Any first century Jewish listener to this statement would go wide-eyed in hearing Luke’s description because they would hear the reference to the temple and the ark of covenant; that Luke was saying that Mary herself was the real Holy of Holies, the true Ark bearing the covenant – no longer born by the whole male temple structure, but rather by a single young woman. And, this is key, God emerged from her without the need for a male High Priest entering in at all, and like the creation of the universe, this was another moment of creation out of nothing, a second big bang, if you will!

Listen to the way the theologian James Alison describes it - “Of course there is a biological mystery here: where did the necessary extra chromosome come from which alone enables a male child to be conceived? And the only answer I know is a negative one: not from any human paternity, or from within any human structure of desire, parentage, male possessiveness, need to control or propagate. Rather it came in the same way that Creation comes: as something out of nothing. Mary is living out in herself virgin creation, new fecundity, ripe with constantly birthing possibilities, not determined by men, not tied down into property or chattelage but a vessel, an ark for God.”

So at the Annunciation Mary is asked to be in herself the Holy of Holies, the portal by which the immaterial Creator enters into the

material realm as baby, as Jesus the Christ, through whom a new covenant will be forged. The virginal nature of Mary is not about how she was uncorrupted by sex, although it is often explained that way, but rather about how this was pure gift and new creation from God, not propagated in the usual way but a new beginning for a new creation. It was a break from the old order and it all hinged there on Mary's consent... and as Denise Levertov describes it "She did not cry 'I cannot, I am not worthy' nor 'I have not the strength. She did not submit with gritted teeth, raging coerced. Bravest of all humans, consent illumined her. The room filled with its light, the lily glowed in it and the iridescent wings. Consent, courage unparalleled, opened her utterly."

And with that consent Mary conceives a son. Soon thereafter we hear that she gets up and visits her cousin Elizabeth who remember is pregnant with John the Baptist. And what happens? When Elizabeth hears Mary's greeting, John the Baptist in Elizabeth's womb "leaps for joy" the scripture says. That phrase is only used one other place in the scriptures and it is when the great King David of Ancient Israel, "leaps for joy" before the Ark of the Covenant.

This is what is meant by the phrase "in the fullness of time". How many hundreds and thousands and hundreds of thousands of years had this time been ripening for a woman to bear a child and the world to finally receive her King:

Isaiah 'twas foretold it, the Rose I have in mind;
 With Mary we behold it, the virgin mother kind.
 To show God's love aright, she bore to men a Savior,
 When half spent was the night.