

Even Now—Something Waits to be Born ...Out of a Risky Choice

[Luke 1:26-45](#)

More than any of the other three Gospel authors—John, Matthew, Mark—Luke was a writer. A well-crafted story mattered to him. His sentences speak like something you would read in a classic, rather than how you would talk when you tell a story around a campfire. The *narrative arc* was important to him, the tone of the actors' voices, the scenes he painted. Luke knew all those details would make a difference in the way we see and remember Jesus. It mattered to Luke not just for an accurate account of history, but for understanding Jesus—where he came from, the way his eyes settled on certain people, who circled back to his side over and over again. Those things tell us as much about what it means for God to live among us as the story itself.

Do you remember the movie *The Wizard of Oz*? Remember the the characters who were there with Dorothy in the opening scene? They showed up again at the end of the movie. And then finally it becomes clear—these are the people who had been there all along. They were the companions who had traveled with her all the way through the Land of Oz. They held her up when she fell, and when the flying monkeys attacked. They stood with her when she said out loud, “I’ll never get home.” Without them Dorothy’s story—her journey from Kansas through the wonderful land of Oz and back home again—would have been a nice story. But we wouldn’t have understood that this was a story about heart and courage and wisdom.

Who were those characters for Jesus? If you answer quickly, out of an unsurprising story you heard a long time ago, you might say the disciples. And it’s true that twelve men were with Jesus for most of his ministry. But that’s not where Luke starts. For this storyteller, there’s another group of people you need to meet first, to understand Jesus. They’re women. Two women: one old and way past her prime, her usefulness to society. The other young, too young to even have begun her adult life, caught in a situation that was confusing to her and an embarrassment to her family. Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist; Mary, the mother of Jesus.

It’s hard in our day to comprehend how radical it was for Jesus’ biography to begin this way, for the first chapter of his life to be a story of two pregnant women. We’ve spent the last hundred years in this country learning and practicing a new truth—that women can do anything men can do. But for most of history, what happened to women didn’t get documented. It’s not that women weren’t there, or that there weren’t stories to be told; it’s just that those stories didn’t seem to matter much. Remember, a couple of weeks ago we read together the first chapter of Matthew? Who did the angel appear to to announce Jesus’ birth?

Joseph. God’s conversation partners had always been men, all through the biblical story. Prophets, kings, fathers, sons.

And now Luke comes, a writer who says, “Let me tell this story carefully.” And his first illustration is a picture of women. They’re not powerful, *Lean In* women. They’re not queens, or even first ladies. Their stories aren’t about ambition or aspiration or the triumph of single-minded focus. They weren’t looking for recognition; maybe not even for intense spirituality. And still, God found them, came to them, trusted *women* for the most holy of responsibilities.

“Favored one” the angel calls Mary from the moment he greets her. “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.” And the angel goes on to describe the most ridiculously impossible dream. You are part of this dream, Mary, the angel says. God needs you. For nine months, until he is ready to be born, God will live inside your body. You will be like the mother of God.

“Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Luke tells this story as if Mary answered clearly and confidently, immediately: Yes, sure, I can do that. But I always wonder whether Mary’s ‘yes’ didn’t have to be more tentative than that—a little more like “OK...” And then the angel was gone. Now what?

The angel’s voice had been encouraging, kind. But still—she needed someone else to talk to about this, someone with skin on them, someone who would help her make sense of this strange thing she had just said ‘yes’ to. And so she gathers up a few things and goes to see her kinswoman, her *auntie*. Elizabeth, who she knew would be there for her. Elizabeth, who would understand how it felt to be surprisingly pregnant. Elizabeth who would take her in without asking questions. Feed her. Tell her stories. Remind her of who she was, in the middle of this strangeness.

Luke tells us about the moment Mary arrives at Elizabeth’s home as if there’s an explosion of grace. The doorbell rings and things begin to happen. The baby inside Elizabeth leaps to attention. She feels the Holy Spirit—a sureness of God’s presence—in a way she never has before. She’s so excited, she squeals with delight. There’s a moment of clairvoyance; she recognizes in Mary—for Mary—that something immense has happened to her, rearranged her life. Somehow Elizabeth knows this strange secret that Mary hasn’t even said out loud yet. Elizabeth greets Mary as if she feels warmed, honored, to see her. She blesses Mary with a welcome beyond anything she’d hoped for.

I wonder whether it wasn’t Elizabeth’s enthusiasm that made this whole thing seem real for Mary. It’s only *after* this moment with Elizabeth that we hear Mary’s *Magnificat*, her song of praise. It could only come from someone who is confident that she’s been called to something important.

*My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.*

I’ve been trying to picture this scene of two women, an older auntie offering strength and courage to a young woman called to a task that must have seemed overwhelming; each of them showing the other that her life had been touched by holiness. I can’t help seeing Maria Kainessie, the much-loved member of our church who died just a few months ago. She was “Mama Maria” to a far larger family than the children she gave birth to. For years, every day, she took care of children from the African community, children of parents who are working hard to make the better life that America promises. The children would arrive at her house—her small apartment—early in the morning. Sometimes they were babies only a few months—or weeks—old, left in the care of someone who would love them like her own. Children loved her; Maria is “Grandma” to many children in Campbell and San Jose. Those children were as comfortable with her as in their own homes. She fed them; she bathed them before their parents came back. And Mama Maria not only cared for the children, Tamba Tugbawa told me this week; she cared for their parents. “Here. Have something to eat,” she would say when they stopped on their way home from work. “You must be tired.” She made children and adults feel safe. She made their lives possible.

So often we think of women (and men) who do the kind of work that Mama Maria did as an aside to the real work that goes on in the world, background support for the work that really matters. Child care workers. Caregivers for vulnerable adults. Healthcare workers who follow quietly behind doctors and nurses. They're largely invisible to most of the world. Not to God.

Luke's story says, right there in the first chapter: *These* are the bearers of God. These are people the angel comes to and says, "Greetings, favored one." They don't build temples and cathedrals; they don't lead organizations. But they're the ones who carry God in their bodies. Their insides leap in recognition when the Holy Spirit is hovering close by. They give us eyes to see that God is right here, moving among us—in our children, in people who tug on us for attention, in people who are not at their strongest or best. They are aunties. Caregivers. And all those other people we never stopped to count, but who might be housing God inside of them.

Just like the characters in *The Wizard of Oz*, Luke's women show up again and again in the Gospel. They're there at the end of Jesus' life: witnesses as he dies, the first ones at the tomb on Easter morning. Luke tells us that women are Jesus' financial supporters. He calls them to sit close when he teaches and when he shows up for dinner. They care for Jesus in ways Mama Maria cared for 'her' family, ways he needed to be cared for. Luke wanted us to know this about Jesus. He wanted us to know it *first*.

The 12th century mystic Meister Eckhardt said, "We are all meant to be mothers of God." The message that everyone is included—welcomed—into the circle of grace is there in every story of Jesus, all four Gospels. But Luke got something else about him, and wanted us to see it. That Jesus' eyes went first to the people who were mostly invisible in his society. Today his gaze might take in undocumented immigrants, farmworkers, fast food cashiers, hotel workers, all those kids who slept and partied illegally in an Oakland warehouse called the Ghost Ship. People barely hanging on to the productive society we are trying to create here. The Jesus we meet in Luke's Gospel wouldn't say to them, "Oh, yeah—you can come along too." It wasn't about tolerance or even some principle about full inclusion. He would look them straight in the eye and speak with the kindness of an angel.

"Greetings, favored one," he would say.

"Can I stay with you for a while?"