

Advent 2: How We Wait: Perplexed, Surrendering

Ken Wilson, 12/9/18

or, What We Miss When We Focus on the Virgin Birth Like A Bunch of Gentiles

Advent series on waiting. Today look at **Luke 2: 26-28** (Read)

State Funeral of 41st President, we had all former and current Presidents and spouses in first row. Much ado about nuthin' was made of the fact that one of the couples didn't recite the Apostles Creed which includes, "I believe in JC, born of the Virgin Mary"

Virgin Birth used as litmus test of proper religiosity-patriotism. Odd: it's only referenced here and in gospel of Mt—absent in Mk-Jn. Not found anywhere else in NT writings. Paul/James/Peter ignore it. Our English translation of Isaiah's prophecy, "*behold the virgin will be with child, and you will call his name Immanuel*" is a mistranslation—word has always meant "young woman."

I'm not arguing against it, but I would like to return Mary and this experience she had to its Jewish roots—where it has more to do with securing her status as a disgraced woman honored by God than qualifying her to keep her purity ring.

Gospel of Mt opens with a list of Jesus ancestors—only women mentioned disgraced women: **Tamar** (who posed as a prostitute to trick her father-in-law into having sex with her) **Rahab** (Jericho prostitute who helped Israel spies,) **Ruth** (single woman who a scandalous night in field with Boaz;) **Bathsheba**, wife of Uriah, taken by King David, mother of Solomon.

God works w/ disgraced people to bring about his good realm... especially disgraced women under a cloud of sexual impropriety

Luke evokes same theme with two opening "annunciations"— angels making a pregnancy announcement. First, to **Zechariah**, husband of **Elizabeth**, mother of John Baptist, who lived under disgrace of barrenness (infertility—always ascribed, unfairly to woman)... and **Mary**, whose pregnancy apart from the agency of her husband, brought lifelong disgrace on her and her son.

Very first annunciation in Bible came to **Hagar, a young woman**

Like Elizabeth & Mary, a woman who was no stranger to disgrace. She is slave-girl of Abraham-Sarah; Egyptian, her name means “alien” and like so many immigrants she is abused by the more powerful Abraham-Sarah; used as a surrogate when they are infertile, but when she becomes pregnant, Sarai turns on her (harassed or abused her) ... she flees for her life...and then comes first-ever annunciation, that she will bear a son, Ishamel.

The angel of the Lord said, “You are now pregnant and you will give birth to a son. You shall name him Ishmael”

Echoed later by Isaiah: *Behold, the young woman shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel*

Hagar’s role is downplayed, perhaps because Muslims claim Ishmael, as a founding figure. But she plays a very important role.

Hagar is Abram’s counterpart. God speaks directly to her, forging a relationship independent of God’s relationship with Abram, and she responds in that way. She names God (“You are El-roi,” meaning “the one who sees me”; Gen 16:13)—founder’s role. Her son, Ishmael, like Abrahams grandson, Jacob, becomes a founder with 12 sons, leaders of 12 tribes

All of this would fire the Jewish imagination hearing Mary’s story. While the orthodoxy police focus on virgin birth as a litmus test—Jewish reading highlights God’s preference to work via disgraced people--in particular, those whose disgrace has something to do with sex or sexual innuendo...

This is reinforced by presence at end of all 4 gospels of an angel making another announcement to women: birth of a whole new order of creation signaled by risen Jesus—a disgraced man, thought to be guilty, but declared innocent by God

Somehow, the “gospel” has been focused on declaring everyone guilty... but the good news of the 4 gospels is more about declaring disgraced people innocent!

A Jewish reading of the angel’s announcement to Mary helps us with another problem when we don’t have our Jewish lenses on.

“The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail.”³⁸ “I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May your word to me be fulfilled.” Then the angel left her.

Beneath piety this text has accumulated over centuries of use at Christmas... is a problem raised by a feminist reading. Typical marriage age for Jewish man of this period was 18...earlier for women, which would place Mary as a girl just past onset of menses, 13/14/15. While God in Hebrew Bible transcends gender, he is most frequently imagined as male. Seems a little **creepy**: Young Woman impregnated by Male God (Ancient of Days at that.)

Amy Jill Levine, a Jewish scholar who specializes in NT writings, says in Jewish tradition, the Holy Spirit--understood as the divine presence—regarded in feminine terms. In writings of rabbis, Heb. *Shekinah*, feminine noun: **dwelling** or **settling** or even **nesting**. The Divine presence that settles on a person or place imagined as a feminine presence, if any gender had to be assigned.

Judaism of this period had a strong sense of the divinity of Wisdom, Gk. Sophia, personified as a woman.

These are the images that would have been evoked by picture of the Holy Spirit “**overshadowing**” Mary—the Shekinah dwelling, settling, or nesting in Mary...Sophia coming to Mary.

Not something I’m super comfortable talking but unavoidable here: For about 18 months (2005-2006) I had a remarkable period of daily prayer... corresponded with

Phyllis Tickle about this ... remember a time when I was experiencing divine presence as feminine ... at first it was unsettling because I associated feminine intimacy with erotic/romantic encounter. Emailed Phyllis about this, like **“Am I weird, is this OK?”** She replied in her characteristic Southern-Mystic way, **“Oh Wilson, what’s your problem—sounds like Sophia is paying you a visit. Relax and enjoy it!”**

Gentiles use virgin birth to mean: *Oh, this proves that God, not Joseph is the father of Jesus!*— we run with the masculine image.

But not what’s going on here. Mary is having an experience of the divine presence that in the Jewish imagination has a feminine quality ... if we have to use gendered pronoun, we’d say Mary is surrendering to Her not to Him. *This is not a masculine overture.*

So, let’s bring this round to waiting. Mary is in early phase of full adulthood—betrothed to be married. She is a young woman in Roman occupied territory, extremely vulnerable. The rate of assault on young women in territory overrun with young men in an occupation force—with no Geneva convention, no possibility of war crimes tribunal, had to be staggering. We know that since Mary experience pregnancy outside the normal and only legitimate agency of her husband—she must have lived with a sense of social disgrace.

Just as much of our own waiting for a better future, almost always has some measure of disgrace attached to it. How come I’m not further along in my life, more successful, whatever...

We are like Mary was when angel first appeared, “perplexed”—not terrified like Zechariah, but baffled. A normal part of waiting.

In that place, Mary experiences the divine presence in this way that has no trace of male dominance, in this way that is honoring, speaks only words of blessing ... and creates space for her.

And so, naturally, she surrenders to this divine presence. Her surrender says more about the divine presence she experienced than it says about Mary. Her surrender is like a straight man falling for a woman, or a lesbian woman falling for a woman.

What if we thought of our own waiting like this—perplexed, of course, as we cannot know the future ... But at the same time surrendering to the divine presence in the presence, because this is how we're asked to imagine the divine presence

As something that in the face of our disgrace, honors and blesses us over and over.

²⁶ In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷ to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

²⁹ Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰ But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. ³¹ You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

³⁴ "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

³⁵ The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called^[a] the Son of God. ³⁶ Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. ³⁷ For no word from God will ever fail."

³⁸ "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.