

# The Great Reset

Luke 1: 26-38

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By

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

The reaction to news of a pregnancy is not always positive. Not everyone hears the news with the same ears. Some surprises just leave us speechless. When my wife and I were pregnant with our second daughter, my father heard the news and immediately I could see concern on his face. He wanted to ask, “Have you considered the cost of having a child? Are you prepared for the responsibilities that come with an expanding family? Do you have any idea what it costs to educate a child through college these days?” As he fumbled trying to respond, I finally just said, “Dad, I’m not asking you to raise this child, I just want you to be excited for us. We’ll figure out the rest.” Truth be told, I had quit my job and was working temporarily driving for UPS in the Christmas rush, delivering packages I couldn’t afford. He had good reasons for concern. And he just couldn’t understand the rather blind faith with which I was approaching life. Now another life would be dependent upon the decisions I was making, so he was not wrong to be concerned.

I sometimes wish I could go back to that conversation and say, “Dad, let me tell you what’s going to happen – I’m going to complete two master’s degrees and become a Presbyterian minister, serving churches and a seminary in a long and satisfying career. I will become a Dean at Princeton Seminary and later, the Chair of the Board. And this child we’re having is going to grow up to become the most beautiful and talented woman, smart and kind. She will complete two master’s degrees of her own and have her own song to sing like Mary, and will marry this wonderful, incredibly smart and caring man, living somewhere in the country where neither you nor I could ever afford to live. It will work out!” At the time I only had a vague sense that it would work out somehow – I just didn’t know how. That was the best I could claim that day.

Soren Kierkegaard once wrote, “Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards.” Which brings me to this story about Mary. Not everyone heard the news of her pregnancy with the same ears.

Here is Mary, pregnant with God’s coming future, chosen to bear the one who is life, and that

“life was the light of all people.” She has no clue how it will work out, but she has faith that it will somehow. We know now that it will work out, but she has to live her life forward, not backward. And when she finally finds her voice, she is able to sing praises to her Lord and God — a song about justice for all. This is the great reset initiated by God.

What would life be without surprises? Maybe a lot less embarrassing, and some surprises we can do without, but Christmas is not one of them. It's one surprise that the whole world is still trying to come to terms with. It's something we do not expect at all, or even want. It's a gift from God that we can't take back. There's no gift receipt with this gift.

The annunciation for Mary was so unexpected, a surprise of the first order. Imagine Mary waking up, going about her chores, and suddenly, without warning, a stranger appears to her and tells her she is going to have a child. “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is WITH you . . . Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now you will conceive in your womb and bear a son.” She is not physically or emotionally ready. She is very likely a teenager at this point because they married young in those days. This upsets the plans she and Joseph have to marry. This will bring embarrassment to her family. She is surprised and puzzled by the stranger who first has to calm her down enough so she can comprehend what is being said. But to her credit, Mary has the fortitude to reply, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” God has acted to redeem the world. The great reset is beginning.

If you want to read about the annunciation, you have to read some Medieval Roman Catholic theologians, like Bernard of Clairvaux and Bonaventure, writers from between 1000 and 1300. They argue that Mary was the antithesis of Eve. Just as Jesus becomes the new “Adam” and sets right all that has gone wrong in the creation (according to the Apostle Paul), so too Mary is perceived as the new Eve. One author arguing from those two medieval writers claims:

“The Annunciation is the fundamental mystery in Mary's life and so the mystery that founds all of the other mysteries she embodies – her immaculate conception, her perpetual virginity, her divine motherhood, her cooperation with her Son's salvific work, her bodily assumption and, lastly, her heavenly queenship.”<sup>1</sup>

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1 Weinandy, Thomas, “The Annunciation and Nativity: Undoing the Sinful Act of Eve” *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, Volume 14 Number 2 April 2012.

It is the undoing of the actions of Eve in Genesis.

Rather than resisting God's plan, Mary embraces it. Mary accepts the role God has established for her, rather than rejecting it because it seems too incredible. She trusts her Lord rather than trusting herself or giving in to her doubts and uncertainty. The story of Mary is the story of how God calls the unqualified to participate in the unfolding drama of salvation.

Writer/theologian Frederick Buechner imagined the angel Gabriel's feelings as he announced the good news to Mary. He writes:

She struck the angel Gabriel as hardly old enough to have a child at all, let alone this child, but he'd been entrusted with a message to give her, and he gave it.

He told her what the child was to be named, and who he was to be, and something about the mystery that was to come upon her. "You mustn't be afraid, Mary," he said.

As he said it, he only hoped she wouldn't notice that beneath the great, golden wings, he himself was trembling with fear to think that the whole future of creation hung now on the answer of a girl.<sup>2</sup>

This isn't a story about people putting aside their earthly lives for a while so they can attain some kind of spiritual highpoint or mountaintop experience in order that they might be more acceptable to God and more deserving. No, actually, it is a story about people stuck in their lives and without much hope for the future, with strained family relationships focused mostly upon surviving, making a living, getting ahead, and securing a better future, who unexpectedly discover that the God who made all the stuff in the first place has entered the world in order to redeem it; babies and adults, shepherds and business people, gold and frankincense, animals and cities, governments and nature – all of it! And the Lord still enters in, especially where invited.

Mary's story also underscores the fact that we don't have to stop being human in order to start being God's. God calls the unqualified, but never leaves us alone or to our own devices. The Lord promises to be with us. So, what new thing is the Lord trying to bring into existence in your life? What do you feel unqualified to bear, or to receive, or to do?

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2016/9/24/gabriel>

Just like Mary, we may not be able to choose everything that happens to us in life, but we can choose how we respond. This year we have come to see how little we really can control. I know people who have a running narrative of their life that they are a victim; a victim of their parent's dysfunction, or a victim of economic hardship, or unjust social structures, or a victim of unfair employment practices, or a victim of gender discrimination and sexual harassment. I'm not suggesting that these problems don't exist or aren't real, nor that we should not seek to confront societal injustice where it exists. And real victims need our empathy and compassion and help. But too often some people find conspiracies where none exist because they've learned to play the role of victim in their own life. Mary may have been poor and from an underprivileged ethnic group but the story that she chose to interpret her life was not that of a victim but that of a child of God participating in the Lord's unfolding plan for the world. She was one of God's elect! "Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards." Knowing you are unqualified doesn't stop you if you believe your life has meaning and purpose, a gift from God for those who believe.

There are many things in life we don't get to choose. We didn't choose our parents or siblings, we can't choose our genetic predispositions for cancer or Alzheimer's Disease, or our talent for one thing and not another. And when it comes down to it, lots of things happen to us that we didn't plan, like getting sick. But we can choose how we respond to life. We can choose the story line of our own lives, and the stories that will give our life meaning and significance – the way we interpret what happens to us. We have a conscious say in what narrative we will use to make sense of the world and our experience. Mary chose to see the world as the place where God is active and alive, especially on behalf of those who are in need and at the end of their own resources. Mary chose to sing a song of praise in the midst of her predicament – as a young woman engaged to a carpenter and pregnant with God's possibilities.

Similarly, you and I get to choose which story will define who we are and who we will become. We may limit our concerns to our own small lives; to those in our own families or those who are like us; or to misshapen goals and desires. Or we can see the world through a different lens, beyond our control and making, where the Lord is present and is moving all life toward a better future. We can broaden our concerns to include others and work for a world where everyone

has food to eat, and a place to lay their head, and can make a living and build a future for their families. I don't know how precisely but we'll figure it out. I do know this, it begins with faith! It begins with confidence that the God who gave us life will not abandon us now or ever.

We can strive for a world that belongs to God and not to greed or evil; where insignificant people like Mary, and you, and me, can make impossible contributions, participating in God's unfolding drama of salvation – the Great Reset. We're living through one of the most historic years of our lives. Will this experience make us better? In time, will we emerge from this pandemic and become part of the great reset? Or will we become even more suspicious, more victimized, more anxious and afraid?

We can choose whether we will live by faith, empowered by love or live stingy lives filled with complaining and anxiety about an uncertain future while playing out the worst-case scenarios in our minds. Life hasn't turned out as expected this year. Will this year make us better or worse? It will depend partly on how we frame our understanding and what lens we choose to look through.

Now if one teenager can make a world of difference, what might you be able to do to help this world become not as it is, but as it might be, as it can be, as it will be one day, by God's grace? Pushback the darkness in your own life, be kind to others, be kind to yourself. Take up the cause of justice for all. Let God's remarkable plan for the transformation of all things work its mystery in you – and through you as it did Mary. Respond to the Lord as she did, "Let it be – with me – according to your word." Amen



