

Mary says yes: Luke 1:26-38, 47-55

by [John K. Stendahl](#) in the [December 4, 2002](#) issue

At Christmas even the most Protestant among us can be drawn to the contemplation of Mary. It seems right to recall her humble courage, her receiving and carrying and giving birth, and her joy as she sang of the saving work of God. The old King James Version puts part of Mary's doxology this way: "He hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts." Those words seem especially apt to me, for it is indeed by our imagining, by what our hearts picture in fear or desire, that we humans are pushed and pulled in our many directions.

Yet if imagination is such a medium for our destruction, could it not also serve to gather and bless us? Instead of imagining fantasies and terrors, may we not imagine ourselves alongside Mary, seeing history's hard cruelty give way to hope and gracious surprise? We sing her song of praise and envision the vindication of the poor. We picture her child newborn as if we ourselves held him in our arms, as if God thus came to us as well. By "making believe," we may in fact come to believe. Yet more, what we imagine may take on flesh and truth before our eyes.

I think that we practice this imagination of the heart, by the gift and command of God, in our worship. We make believe that love rules already, that the lowly are lifted up, death conquered, sin cleansed away, peace triumphant, and Christ touched and seen and tasted. On the verge of Christmas, we imagine and sing with Mary in this way.

Yet grateful as I am for her example and companionship in this, there are a couple of things about Mary, or about our churchly imagination of her, that trouble me. The first might be termed an ethical worry. It is that we who are privileged play at a nativity-scene peasanthood and join in the song of Mary without placing our real lives in its context. The Magnificat may move us with its dream of redistributive justice, but do we make imaginative solidarity with Mary only to domesticate her to our decidedly inexpensive fantasies of peace on earth? Are we drawn to consider what this will cost us and to begin paying that price?

I pray that we who have much of the world's goods and power will hear Mary's words about the proud and rich as warnings and salutary threats to ourselves. If we are able to sing those words lustily, let it be because we are seduced by the grandeur and grace of the salvation she describes, but let it also join us to those who yearn for a turning of the socioeconomic tables. I fear that we will instead use her as a talisman, a manger-set figure, in order to feel as if we're already on the right side of the revolution she sings about. She ought to be more humanly real and powerful than that.

I also worry that Mary will be easily domesticated to my ethical evasions because she is often pictured as meekly compliant. And there begins my second, more theological, Marian discomfort, having to do with the themes of power and consent in this story of our salvation. Part of this is Luke's vision. His Gospel is known for its attention to women, but they are portrayed in accord with his strong emphasis on piety and filial obedience. The banter and hard questioning we hear from women in the other Gospels is hardly prominent, if even present, in Luke's imagining. His Mary can seem a paragon of compliance.

Perhaps we are intended to see the contrast between Mary's assent—"Let it be with me according to your word"—and the primordial disobedience of Eve. The implication is that womanhood, or the soul of all our humanity, will be redeemed not in self-assertion but in abnegation and subordination. We may resist that ideological paradigm and its implications, but it seems near at hand in the account of Gabriel's visit to Nazareth.

Indeed, the angelic annunciation is not worded as a proposal but as an exercise of irresistible power: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." Our piety may protect us from seeing an analogy here with the rape of Io, mighty Zeus covering a woman in the shape of a dark cloud, but even without such blasphemous association the suggestion of patriarchal violence lurks in the story's shadows.

And yet I think we can hear something else in the assent of Mary. To me it seems as if her yes has transfigured the story, for now it hinges on her word, her participation and presence in the drama. That's the kind of story the Bible repeatedly tells. The suggested pattern is no longer so much of divine imposition as one in which Gabriel and God and all the heavens stand in breathless suspense. All history, the salvation of the world, now seems to hang on this one young woman's answer.

Like the assent of Job to God's cosmic majesty in Archibald MacLeish's *J.B.*, gentling God "the way a farmhand / Gentles a bulging, bugling bull," Mary's consent subtly recasts the story of power. It is as if the grand God of Israel has become for us—is willing to be for us—like Myles Standish, dispatching Gabriel as a substitute suitor to plead his case. The case may be pressed with claims of power and promises of blessing, but still the ancient one trembles and waits for an answer.

Imagine that. Imagine that he's waiting for us too.