

SHARE HOPE

Exodus 3: 1-8, 13,14; Luke 1:26-45

Once upon a time, God was troubled by the bondage and pain his people were suffering. He decided it was time to act; this time he wanted human collaboration. God searched all the earth to find a person to deliver his people Israel from bondage; as God peered to earth, as if with the long lens of a spy satellite, the holy eyes spotted a baby boy floating in a basket made of bulrushes at the river's bank. God made a mental note to talk with that one when he got older, thinking he might be just the one to approach to be part of Heaven's plan. When the boy grew older, God waited until he was alone, caring for sheep like a Bedouin shepherd. The baby had grown into a young man named Moses. When no one else was looking, God sent an angel to speak to him: The voice came like a great ball of fire, getting Moses' undivided attention: The voice didn't have to warn him not to come close; after all, it was a broom tree on fire! But to give Moses a big clue about who was speaking, the messenger declared the ground on which he was standing 'holy.' *This was no ordinary messenger.* God had chosen Moses to carry the burden of fulfillment for the first covenant; a testament to God's power and love for Israel. From this small and sordid band of loosely connected brothers and their wives and children, God raised up a free and great nation. God had sent an angel to ask one man—Moses—to play a part in Heaven's plan. And Moses said "yes." After God's plan was carried out and the people were delivered to freedom, Moses and his sister, Miriam, sang songs of praises to God on the banks of the Sea of Reeds, also called the Red Sea. Moses is, by his answer to that angel, the central figure of the Old Testament.

Long after the birth, life, and death of Moses, things spiraled out of control. Like a nation that outgrows colonial rule or a town that outgrows rural government, Israel continued to grow. It soon was ruled by Judges, then by Kings who were advised by prophets. But much was at stake, so corruption set in; people sought power, money, and fame. People from other parts of the world, like Rome, sent leaders to control their unruly provinces in Israel. Caesar, not Julius, but Augustus, was in power as our story continues in Luke Chapter one. The man Rome allowed to have power over the Jews was their King, Herod, one of the most paranoid rulers ever. Not unlike dictators today who name buildings and erect statues in their own honor, by his own decree his official title was “Herod the Great.” Herod was just maniacal in brutal rule and self-protection, killing one of his own wives, his mother, and some of his sons when he feared they would try to arrange a coup. During that time, God could see an intervention would be necessary again. The world was going to Hell if it stayed the course. Prophets were telling the truth, and then being beheaded or tortured because of it. God had to get people’s attention with a different strategy. It would be daring; it would be risky; and the plan would come through a powerless person but one precious in God’s sight. God, again, searched all the earth to find the right one to deliver his people from their own sinfulness. The Lord had to find a willing collaborator if his plan was to work: the plan was the most radical the world could imagine: God would come to earth to live, not as a grown man or woman; not as a statue or a force of nature; God would come in utter weakness and dependence. God chose to know the limitations and weaknesses of mortality. God would come as a human baby. But in order for that to happen, there had to be a woman willing to carry the child; bear

the child; and nurture the child. Without that key part of the plan, it would fail. God was not in the business of failing. So God chose carefully.

Looking around through Heaven's eyes of love and discernment, God noticed a small, dirty, out of the way village in Galilee. There in Nazareth, a girl, (a teenager) had been raised well by her family. She was faithful and had been brought up in a trusting home. She was loved by her father very much, so he had selected a hard-working and honorable man for her to marry. The arrangements had been made by the girl's father and the young man's father; and so it was to come to pass. They were engaged; and after suitable quarters would be added to the father's house, the couple would live with his parents. He was a skilled tradesman, who could work equally well with wood and stone: a "tector." His name was Joseph; and her name was Mary. God saw their plans, and hated to break them, but if the plans of the Holy One were to work, a man of character and patience had to be chosen along with a pure and innocent girl. This was the perfect couple. God's last step was to find out if they would agree to become collaborators in a plan—as extraordinary as it seemed—to save the world.

God first sent a hand-selected angel to Mary. If she did not agree to participate, other arrangements would have to be made. In fact, author and Pastor John Claypool suggests that God never forces divine power onto human frailty when asking for a collaborator. God had searched the world for Moses, who finally agreed to the plan. Now God was asking Mary to second his motion to bear a child who would be the Son of God. The Gospel of Luke tells us that Mary said "yes." Her answered gave her a vital role in ushering in God's New Covenant, a testament to God's continuing love and

amazing grace. What a perfect choice God had made! She must have been raised in a home that honored God; that told stories about angels and prophets and Godly appearances including the story of Moses. Could she have ever dreamed that she also would be the one chosen to be part of the next chapter of salvation? And in a move that the world considered ill-advised, she didn't consult her fiancé before consenting to this radical plan. Her answer was her own, given from her own heart, and the deal was sealed. God knew she would face harsh judgment by others when they found out she was with child before marriage. So God continued with the plan: one of Heaven's Angels was also sent to Joseph. God counted on this man to take a stand with Heaven and with his wife-to-be. It was clearly a lot to ask. Would Joseph be willing to suffer humiliation and also say "yes" to God's request? Mary's answer is recorded in Luke 1; Joseph's in Matthew 1: they said "yes." God had chosen wisely; Joseph loved young Mary so much that he was willing to stand by her rather than break off the engagement. He continued with the marriage plans, acting to the world as if the boy Mary was carrying was his son. He would raise him as his own until such time that the world might find out the extraordinary news of his real identity: Jesus, known as the son of Joseph, would grow up and claim his other title: Son of God: all because Mary and Joseph said "yes" to an angel's meeting.

We can now see why Mary, a girl, has been revered through the ages for her answer to God. When the child indeed began growing inside of her with Joseph's emotional but not physical assistance, she went away from town for about three months to live with her cousin, Elizabeth. Providentially, Elizabeth also had extraordinary news: she was also carrying a child, even though she was advanced in years. An angel of the Lord had also told her

husband, Zechariah, that they would have a son, and that they should name him John. He, too, would have a special role in God's plan.

Because Mary agreed to the life-changing request from God, she has been revered for over 2000 years; her image has been painted and sculpted in the most lovely and holy ways. She has been depicted as being different ages, but always plain and yet beautiful. She was the one part of God's plan that was so intimate, yet so crucial. Mary agreed to be "the handmaiden of the Lord." What a role. And like Moses and Miriam before here, she remembered what *they* did when they took part in God's salvation plan: *they sang; and she sang too!* She sang with words of praise and adoration; her carefully chosen first sentence has been echoed by choirs and congregations throughout the ages: "My soul *magnifies* the Lord, and my spirit *rejoices* in God my Savior. Not all of us have such extraordinary things asked of us by God. But God *does* still need collaborators; God's plan is still fulfilled though human hands and hearts. *God still needs you: to say words in love; to hold the brokenhearted; to help the downtrodden; and to live a holy and joyful life.* This week, it is time for you ... and for me ... to recommit to hear God in prayer; to study about God in Scripture; and to be changed. Is something you are doing that is destructive in a relationship? The Christmas story invites you to change. Are you living for yourself instead of for Jesus? The Christmas story invites you to change. The Christmas story invites you to change. God wants to use us, too, as part of Heaven's plan. Say "yes" to a new life in Christ, and "no" to old habits. Thanks be to Moses, and Joseph; and thanks be to be Mary; for saying "yes" to God's plan.

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