

## A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

*Love Beyond Us*

Luke 2:22-40

December 27, 2020

Thinking about what a rocky, bumpy year it has been, goodness, Mary and Joseph had been on a nonstop roller coaster. From the moment the angel of the Lord skidded to a stop in front of Mary and went on about how she was to have a child and name him Jesus and how her child was going to save the world, nothing had been normal. Yet, Mary's humble, bewildered response that first day was still her spirit through it all: "Let it be to me according to your Word."

That's a safe thing to say if you're a Gnostic . . . you know, for people whose religion is experienced in the non-material world, those for whom God is like an idea floating around, a deity who doesn't intervene or interact with the stuff you touch or taste or your neighbor or your own body. Mary's God was not that kind of god. Mary's God, the God of the Jews, was a God who was always getting involved in people's lives. Sometimes God made life a bit easier; sometimes quite a bit harder, but always in everything God was moving them toward redemption. Through joy and tears, God's love takes on many shapes, but it's always moving toward wholeness and redemption. When Mary said to this God, the God of Israel, "Yes, let it be to me according to your Word," something was going to happen.

Since the day of this profession of faith in God, her body and her heart bore the implications of that decision. About a week after the angel's visit, she became aware of things stirring in her body over which she had lost control. New life was growing in her. She was sick some nights, tired many days. A few months later, her body's shape was changing right before her eyes and the watchful eyes of her neighbors. Her cousin Elizabeth knew what to make of it all. It's a miracle she told Mary. We are both bearing new life when neither of us should be—I am old, you are young. Blessed are you among women, blessed are you who believed what God said to you.

The baby was born in a stable because there was no room in the inn in Bethlehem. They had nowhere else to go and no one who could receive them into their home or give her a proper place to have that baby. But Mary's body was bringing forth that baby one way or another. In a palace or a stable, in a hospital or a barnyard, the baby was coming. When we say yes to God, what is born in us is beyond our ability to control it, manage or corral it, time it or decide when and where God will show up.

This is the nature of love. When we say yes to God in faith, we unleash something beyond our control. Everything we do to give the impression that we are still running the show is a bit of a masquerade. We are not pulling the levers of our lives any longer. We aren't puppets whose strings are just being manipulated by a higher force. We are active participants in the proceedings, but there's something else, too, that's happening--a river of life flowing whose source is just beyond our human knowledge and whose end we do not know. A wind blows through us. We don't know where the wind comes from or where it goes but you know it when it rustles the leaves and bends the boughs of the tree of life.

Love. Love flings open the front door to a refugee family. Love lives life open handed, willing to share possessions with those who need it. Love opens wallets and hearts and homes to children with no home, to elderly who have wisdom to share if anyone will listen, to strangers and sojourners who have nowhere to lay their heads.

Love does all of this, sometimes like it possesses your body: I must do this and can do no other. That's God's love working in you. That is love, the one who lays down their life for their friends.

Love pierced Joseph's heart as he walked with his beloved on her bumpy ride in God's grace. Love pierced Mary's body that night in Bethlehem as she cried out and brought forth into an unsuspecting world, its Savior. In from the fields, shepherds came running to see, and Mary treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart.

As far as I know there's no child-rearing handbook for the parents of the Son of God. The young parents do everything by the book they had, the Law. For all the mystery and chaos of their journey so far, now they play everything by the book.

On schedule, 8 days after birth, they have him circumcised and name him Jesus, as they had been told. Jesus, the name the angel gave him. Did they realize Jesus was actually the name Joshua, the one who led Israel from wilderness into the promised land?

On the 40<sup>th</sup> day after his birth, they did what they were supposed to do, what every parent of every little child did, bring him to Jerusalem to the temple, every day at a certain time of day a procession of little swaddled baby Davids and Nathaniels and Annas and Sarahs were brought by their doting parents into the temple. Six times Luke's Gospel emphasizes what they did they did to be obedient to the law. Mary and Joseph were by-the-book parents. They sought order in the midst of the chaos that every new parent experiences, and they certainly did. They did what they were told was the right thing to do. Or maybe when your life is so turned upside down, you seek order wherever you can find it. At the times in our lives when everything is upside down, we look to plant our feet on solid, sacred ground. For them, that was the temple.

They came to the temple for purification because that's what the Law said to do. They brought the baby to present him to the Lord, because that's what the law said to do and because the Law had a special place for the first born. And they came to offer a sacrifice according to what the Law said. They came like all young parents, earnest, hopeful, dutiful, to do what their parents did and their parents before them.

Love is like this, too. Love is like doing your part in something bigger than yourself. Not just doing your part, but devoting yourself to that which is bigger than yourself. Young parenthood wasn't a time to explore self-expression; it was a time of humility, of participating in traditions that extend far in the past beyond you, and you hope will continue in future generations. The life of this child was a gift of God, and they were bound and determined to honor the God who gave the gift, who gives the gift of life wherever it comes. They're doing the right things even if they don't fully understand why they're doing all that they're doing.

As they were coming into the Temple to honor the traditions of their ancestors and give honor to God in a solemn dedication ceremony, they were interrupted. Of course they were. I'd wonder how much more of this they can take, except that's how it's been for them all along. An angel comes with a message, Caesar announces a census, an innkeeper shows only a sliver of mercy, the baby comes in a stable. Shepherds come from the fields. All they needed was that little drummer boy to show up barumpabumbumming on his drum just outside the window just as the baby falls asleep.

Now they come to the temple, where everything literally is by the book except that even in this, their lives are interrupted by two old people. Not by priests to make the sacrifices, not by rabbis to bless the child, just two old people, nobodies, really, I guess. One a single man; the other a widow. Simeon, the old man; Anna, the old woman. Some said Anna was a prophetess which probably means most people did what they could to avoid her. Other than that, these two have no titles, and like a lot of people just sitting around, most people passing by probably thought they had no real purpose in life.

When these two saw this child they stirred, leapt up like deer talking too loudly about what they see before them. Simeon declares that he can now die in peace because he's seen the salvation of God, the light of the world. Anna takes one look and starts talking to God and anyone who will listen, praising God and telling everyone else there that day about this child and God's redemption that has come. My hunch is that few listened to her and scurried on by with their eyes averted.

Simeon, however, also has words of blessing for Mary and Joseph, especially Mary. But those words of blessing also foretell suffering. It's astonishing how quickly the cross lies over the story of Jesus and all their lives. Simeon speaks of the future awaiting this child. He will determine the fall and rising of many; he will be a sign that will be opposed so the truth hidden inside people will be revealed one way or another. Simeon could see it all. This child's life is going to be God's redemption some will accept, and others will pass on by.

And then Simeon looked at Mary and saw in her face something. I'm moved by the way Frederick Buechner imagines this moment. "Something about the mother stopped him, and his expression changed. What he saw in her face was a long way off, but it was there so plainly he couldn't pretend. 'A sword will pierce through your soul,' he said (Luke 2:35). He would rather have bitten off his tongue than said it, but in that holy place, he felt he had no choice. Then he handed her back the baby and departed in something less than the perfect peace he'd dreamed of all the long years of his waiting."

And there, Mary was left standing, holding a wiggly baby in diapers. Joseph by her side, always by her side. Her body had been pierced by this child, and now, her soul will be too? She stood there, in the middle of the bustling, crowded Temple, a young mother feeling awfully alone. Love, this kind of love, the love where you lay down your life for another, this kind of love, costs so very much. It's bigger than you. It's beyond you. It's deep down in your bones, in your womb, in your heart, in your hands, in your yesterdays and still-unknown tomorrows.

Joseph put his arm around her and whispered, "Come, let's go home." The three of them take one more look back at the Temple as they begin to walk away through the crowds and out of the city.

They each had a mysterious, but certain feeling: We will be back here again. This story is just beginning. And she held her child tighter in her arms.

Most of the people surging around them didn't notice them at all. Just one more poor family in for the day to the city. If they had stopped to see them, really see them, would they have noticed that the child's face shone like the sun?

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