

“What if Mary Said Yes?”

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What if Mary said yes?

We Unitarian Universalists can have a hard time with Christmas. There can be a certain kind of eye roll factor about the whole angel coming to Mary and virgin-birth situation. And it's understandable - we the great teachers of OWL, our comprehensive sex ed curriculum, are very clear about how the whole baby making thing works.

We can also be so thinky that we read this story like an equation and it just doesn't add up. We decide Mary must be a very bad liar with some unseemly secrets, which Joseph may or may not be in on, and the whole story falls flat.

That's one option for interpreting this age-old tale. But it's also not very satisfying and has, shall we say, a certain kind of lady-shaming air to it. Or it posits Mary as this pitiable woman who was taken over against her will and is completely clueless. Up close, the eye roll interpretation has a fair amount of ick factor.

I didn't have a better interpretation than that until I went to divinity school and was surrounded by people who loved both Mary and Jesus dearly. Actual love. Not fluffy adoration, not quaint festivity. Actual love. It's a lot harder to roll one's eyes at that.

My final year in seminary, the Dean of Chapel gave a beautiful sermon about Mary that stopped me in my tracks. It was during the height of the Me Too movement and Dean Maggie Dawn gave a sermon about Mary consenting to becoming a mother. Dean Dawn led us through an incredible exegesis of the biblical text, going through all the parts of the story, and naming all the places where Mary demonstrated consent.

It was liberating, honestly, to watch this reclaiming of Mary's story. To watch a woman listen only to Mary's voice and to amplify that outwards. To hear that it matters when we say yes and when we say no, to believe that someone will listen to us.

And still, even if Mary's entry into motherhood was consensual, there remains the question of virginity. Because without addressing that, we're still looking at Mary and this story with a fair amount of "come one, I know better than that" eye roll. Our reasonableness gets in the way of our wonder.

Thank goodness for colleagues, especially ones who serve other religious traditions. One of my sewing friends on Instagram is a Methodist minister in the pacific northwest. Several weeks ago she posted a passage from a book which I'd like to read to you.

It's called "Rewilding Motherhood: Your Path to an Empowered Feminine Spirituality" by Shannon K Evans, who is a contemplative Catholic author and mother of five.

Here's what Evans says about reclaiming virginity:

"It has been a long time since I considered myself a virgin. I realize that as the mother of enough kids to form my own basketball team, this news will surprise no one. What might come as a surprise, however, is that I'm starting to reclaim the concept itself...."

Evans continues:

"Kim Hudson, author of *The Virgin's Promise*, says the original definition of virgin was "to know your intrinsic worth."

Feminist philosopher Marilyn Frye says a virgin is a wild and willful independent human as opposed to subjugated property.

In Greek mythology, a virgin goddess is one who is self-fulfilling and makes her own choices.

And Evans concludes:

I have read in various places that a working definition of a virgin is a woman 'who belongs to herself.'" (Rewilding Motherhood p. 21)

What if Mary was a woman who belonged to herself? One who knew her intrinsic worth. One who believed that she was capable of mothering a child who would change the world. One who knew that her social status could not keep her from the mystery of creation, the source that she called God, could not keep her from her power.

It's a very different story, read this way. It's also a lot more in line with how we Unitarian Universalists approach the world, tending to the inherent worth of ourselves and each other, making room for the power of all the world's wisdom traditions, even the ones that confuse us.

What if Mary was a virgin? What if she got to choose? What if she said yes when that mystery named Gabriel asked her if she would give the gift of this babe to the world? What if we let ourselves love her?

I can tell you, I find earnest wonder much more compelling than cynicism. It has been a hard year in a lot of ways, which I will not list. And I know a lot of us are feeling a little more crispy around the edges, a little more prone to overwhelm. Cynicism is good armor, but tonight is a night for tenderness, for that miracle of a new child entering the world. For the miracle of believing that maybe the world really can change for the better. For believing that maybe we are part of this great rebirth.

It is a powerful thing, meeting a person who belongs to themselves, someone with the kind of courage that spreads, calling those around them back to center, back to themselves. What if you put down your cynicism and entered into this stable of wonder? Into this place filled with gifts and offered your own?

I'll end with a reading from the Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker who was first ordained as a United Methodist minister and later as a Unitarian Universalist Minister.

Your gifts—whatever you discover them to be—
can be used to bless or curse the world.
The mind's power,
the strength of the hands,
the reaches of the heart,
the gift of speaking, listening, imagining, seeing, waiting
Any of these can serve to feed the hungry,
bind up wounds,
welcome the stranger,
praise what is sacred,
do the work of justice
or offer love.

Any of these can draw down the prison door,
hoard bread,
abandon the poor,
obscure what is holy,
comply with injustice
or withhold love.

You must answer this question:
What will you do with your gifts?
Choose to bless the world.

The choice to bless the world is more than an act of will,
a moving forward into the world
with the intention to do good.

It is an act of recognition,
a confession of surprise,
a grateful acknowledgment
that in the midst of a broken world
unspeakable beauty, grace and mystery abide.

There is an embrace of kindness
that encompasses all life, even yours.

And while there is injustice, anesthetization, or evil
there moves a holy disturbance,
a benevolent rage,
a revolutionary love,
protesting, urging, insisting
that which is sacred will not be defiled.

Those who bless the world live their life
as a gesture of thanks
for this beauty
and this rage.

The choice to bless the world can take you into solitude
to search for the sources
of power and grace;

native wisdom, healing, and liberation.
More, the choice will draw you into community,
the endeavor shared,
the heritage passed on,
the companionship of struggle,
the importance of keeping faith,
the life of ritual and praise,
the comfort of human friendship,
the company of earth
the chorus of life welcoming you.
None of us alone can save the world.
Together—that is another possibility, waiting.

Amen and blessed be.