

After the Angel Departs: Marian Models of Contemplative Response to Change and Crisis

Introduction

For a total of 12 years I taught at a Jesuit university. For the last several years about 85% of my work has been with Roman Catholics. I've noticed Roman Catholics often seem amazed that I, historically Protestant, have great devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary. On a good day, this amuses me. When I am feeling cranky I want to say, "What? Do you think you *own* her?" I remember a Jubilee Mass for a Sister when, at the close, someone spontaneously asked the congregation to sing the Salve Regina in Latin. I was one of about six people in the packed church who could. If Mary is the mother of Jesus, and we are, by definition ("Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." Mark 3:35) siblings, then she is our mother, too.

Although I once undertook an extended, serious study of Our Lady, I don't presume to know Mary from the tradition of Roman Catholic Mariology or from the Greek Fathers of Orthodox Christianity or from the Councils. Insofar as I know her, it is from the Bible and prayer, from Compline (where I learned the Salve with Trappistine nuns), from Icons of the Eastern Church, from Western art, and, because she has helped me out from time to time, once very importantly with my own mother who also had a child she loved and whose vocation she didn't understand. Our Lady untied some big knots for me.

Shall I tell you about Mary's Miracle of Corpus Christi and the Methodist Ladies? Just north of where I live is a village called Warwood, a mill town, a stable working class community of folks who were good neighbors to each other. On its main street, separated by a public middle

school, are Corpus Christi Roman Catholic Church & School and a Methodist Church. The women in those churches were neighbors, but had *never* (or almost never) entered each other's churches. A friend, Sr. Diane, was pastoral associate at Corpus Christi. One Advent she asked me to give some biblically based talks on Our Lady *in the church*. A *Protestant* telling *Catholics* about Mary was a stretch for everybody. Be that as it may, some women in the Methodist Church down the block wanted to hear the talks. They bravely asked if they could attend. Sr. Diane and Fr. graciously said "yes." The first night of the talks, I stood there wondering what in heaven's name I was doing before a slightly skeptical, rather uneasy group of good Catholics, as in marched a massively nervous gaggle of Methodist ladies many of whom had never before been in a Catholic Church.

That is Part I of the miracle. Part 2 happened a couple of months later. The Methodist Church had an annual tradition of woman-led Vespers. When the time for it rolled around, I was asked to preach. Word of this reached Corpus Christi. The evening of the Methodist ladies' service, just as we began to sing the first hymn, the door opened and in trooped the R.C. ladies most of whom had never even *thought* of entering a Protestant Church much less attending a liturgy led by *women*. Mary's Miracle of Corpus Christi & the Methodist ladies was bringing together church ladies who had been on the "same side of the street" for decades. They now collaborate to help their community which has fallen on hard times. You can't convince me that it wasn't our Blessed Mother who brought them together, woman-to-woman, mother-to-mother for the good of a community.

I purposely abandon a scholarly stance vis a vis Mary and dare to share with you personal reflections on Mary, what I observed in reading Luke chapters 1 and 2, especially on

1:26-56, the Annunciation, Visitation, and Magnificat. I pondered those stories and discovered I most resonated with the last bit of verse 38: “Then the angel departed from her.” The question that arose next was “what did Mary do then?” After big, decisive moments of life, when, metaphorically, the “angel departs,” what, with whom, and how do we respond? We will turn to those questions after a brief

Frame of Reference: Mary’s Biblical “Biography” & Luke’s Annunciation Account

The New Testament’s earliest reference to Mary doesn’t name her. Paul wrote to the Galatians “...when the fullness of time had come, God sent his son, born of a woman...so that we might receive adoption as children.” (Gal 4:4-5) “Born of a woman” implies that, without the agency of a human mother, there could have been no Incarnation, and that the Incarnation was to make it possible for us to be children of God and siblings to each other. Caryll Houselander wrote in *The Reed of God* (1944), “It is the purpose for which something is made that decides the material which is used.”¹ Created at the beginning in God’s image, female flesh was deemed by God the proper “material” to inaugurate human salvation. In a chapter on Mary in *New Seeds of Contemplation*, writing of Mary’s Assumption, the American monk Thomas Merton noted it was “a very special manifestation of God’s respect for His creatures...most particularly for the body which was destined to be the temple of His glory.”² Theologies that denigrate the female body aren’t Christian.

Throw away the holy cards of Mary in a filmy, blue nightgown. Gospel images of Mary are images of strength and resourcefulness, and her story resonates with Hebrew scripture. In Matthew’s genealogy (1:2-16), a typical beginning for a Jewish work, she appears in a line of unusual and (sexually) unconventional women: Rahab the Harlot; Ruth the Moabitess; the

¹ Caryll Houselander, *The Reed of God* (Allen, TX: Christian Classics/RCL, 1976) 4.

² Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1962/1972) 172-173.

unnamed wife of Uriah the Hittite and of King David. At the time of Gabriel's annunciation, Luke introduces Mary as a girl of marriageable age (*parthenos*, 12 to 14 years old, at the time "marriage often took place in the mid-teens"³) who chose to cooperate with God, over whom God's spirit moved as it did over the waters of creation. That word "overshadow" (*episkiazein*) has the same root as the word for God's glory overshadowing the Tabernacle in the desert.⁴ (Luke 1:26-38)

Mary's visit to Elizabeth (who was also unconventionally pregnant) culminates in a manifesto for social change (1:39-56) which echoes Hannah's song (1 Samuel 2:1-10), the Psalms, and the Prophets. Luke's birth story focuses on Mary (2:1-12) whose Presentation in the Temple demonstrates her Jewish observance and predicts her joyful and ominous future. (2:22-38) Matthew's narrative focuses on Joseph (1:18-2:12), who, like his Patriarchal namesake, exhibits obedience to dreams, political acumen, and a resourcefulness that kept his family, who for a time were refugees in Egypt, safe. The Holy Family returned to Galilee, Mary's not Joseph's home (Mt 1:19-23; Lk 2:39-40), and made regular religious pilgrimages to Jerusalem. They undoubtedly experienced normal family fears, struggles, joys, and conflicts.

After Jesus leaves home to follow his vocation, John's gospel introduces Mary at a wedding in Cana where she assumes servants will obey her son, and he respects his mother and obeys her. (2:1-11). The predicted sword pierces Mary's heart as Jesus re-defines family (Mk 3:31-34; Mt 12:46-50; Lk 8:19-20) and at his crucifixion where she is present with the faithful women, (John 19:25-27) at which point in John's gospel, Jesus entrusts her to the Beloved Disciple. Acts includes Mary with leaders of the nascent church. (Acts 1:12-14) After that---

³ Amy L. Wordelman, "Everyday Life: Women in the Period of the New Testament," in Carol A. Newsom & Sharon H. Ringe (eds), *The Women's Bible Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992) 394.

⁴ R. Brown (et.al.), *Mary in the New Testament* (NY: Paulist Press, 1978) 132.

silence. Later Christian writers, like the second-century author of the *Protevangelium of James*, attempted to fill in her biography, but Mary's life is largely in shadow. Merton noted "hers is the most hidden of sanctities."⁵ Yet, as Caryll Houselander suggested, it is "...through ordinary human life and the things of every hour of every day that union with God comes about."⁶

That thought returns us to Gabriel's announcement in Luke 1:26-38. As an ecumenical group of biblical scholars agreed some years ago (imagine THAT!), the angel's words to her dramatize what the later church believed about Mary.⁷ It is equally true that Gabriel's words left Mary, herself, in an existential quandary. "Then Mary said, 'Here I am, the slave (*doulas* slaves, of course, had no ownership of their own bodies) of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her." (1:38)

"The angel departed from her." Immediately after Mary says, "yes, I'll do this incredible thing; I'll surrender completely to God," the heavenly messenger leaves her alone to face the practical consequences of her *fiat*. We know, as Paul affirmed, that in her son, Jesus, "all God's promises are a Yes." (2 Cor 1:20) But can *she* have known that? Mary's initial situation reminds me of the end of Mark's gospel where her Son is depicted similarly apparently abandoned. "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34) Jesus, too, chose the Cross in complete surrender and obedience to God, and God *apparently* withdrew and left him hanging there.

After the wonderful, perplexing angelic announcement, after Mary's eternally critical *fiat*, then what? Then the angel departed from her whom all generations call blessed. After the angelic visitation there was the return to "ordinary human life," "the things of every hour of

⁵ Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* 167.

⁶ Houselander 5.

⁷ R. Brown (et.al.) 119.

every day:” the drudgery of carrying water, cleaning, and cooking, later the ever present first century equivalent of diapers. (Doesn’t bear thinking about.) There must have been fear telling her mother, and that good man, Joseph, her betrothed, what had transpired. There certainly was excitement and mystery that pregnant women experience: new life within and the uncertainty of bringing it forth in pain and danger into a far less than perfect world. And there was what only Mary knew, and only she can ever know.

Our spiritual lives also beat to the rhythm of ordinary life: family, job, parish, play, health, sickness, joy, sadness, life, death. This was the life of Our Lady. Perhaps not as dramatically or with such cosmic consequences, we, too, experience annunciations, moments when life presents us with choices the results of which are both important and unfathomable. We, too, experience moments of great spiritual significance, our equivalent of angelic visitations. For us, too, the angel departs, and we are left with the consequences of our visions and decision. Then what?

Scripture gives us glimpses of how Mary responded to the changes and crises precipitated by Gabriel’s announcement. She was not forced; she chose the enormous risk of saying “yes.” Then, as we must, she moved forward, not knowing what would come next. What Mary did when the angel departed provides models for us. She accepted vulnerability, sought community, pondered, and trusted.

Mary’s Responses to the Angel’s Departure

1. Accept Vulnerability (Now what?)

The first of Mary’s responses to the change and crisis may be the hardest for us: it was her acceptance of vulnerability. She was the passive recipient of God’s choice which she actively accepted. She received. She was not yet the giver. She received. Writing of the Council of

Trent's 1546 declaration that Mary was "without sin," Karl Rahner speaks of her "...who wills to be nothing except total receptivity...".⁸ Caryll Houselander notes Mary's response "was so tremendous, yet so passive./ She was not asked to do anything herself, but to let something be done to her."⁹ Most of us find it very hard to "be done to." Very little in the culture of which I am a product teaches the value of passivity or receptivity. But Mary does. Her acceptance of vulnerability, and the humility from which it sprang, became the critical turning point in salvation history.

In the conclusion of her book on Mary, Protestant New Testament scholar Beverly Roberts Gaventa places vulnerability first of three important biblical motifs about the "mother of Jesus." Of the Lukan Mary Gaventa writes "God's selection of her reveals her vulnerability to the One who intervenes in human lives in unexpected ways."¹⁰ God who intervenes in unexpected ways: that certainly sounds familiar. At every level, the angel's unexpected announcement left Mary vulnerable:

~spiritually and religiously: She was a Jew, a monotheist. What did this "Son of God" business mean? How would it change things spiritually? What would the Rabbis say?

~ psychologically: She could not know in advance how those she knew and loved would respond to her circumstances. How would she grow into this? Or was her experience what we would now call "pathological"? Did Mary wonder "am I crazy or what?"

~physically: She was a village girl. People lived in close community. Mary would have known first-hand about infant and maternal mortality. In ancient Israel the average life span of a

⁸ Karl Rahner, *Mary: Mother of the Lord: Theological Meditations* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1963) 75.

⁹ Houselander 11.

¹⁰ Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Mary: Glimpses of the Mother of Jesus* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999) 130. The other two motifs are that Mary "*reflects on events*" and "is among the *witnesses of Jesus.*" Italics in the original.

woman was about 30 years¹¹ and this largely due to the dangers of pregnancy. In her first pregnancy, what woman knows what will happen to her, to her body, and to her baby?

~socially: She was a village girl. In villages people talk. (My late husband said of his home village, “Nothing every happened there, but enough was said to make up for it.”) What will they say when Mary’s “baby bump” shows? And not only about her, but about her parents and her betrothed?

But to be vulnerable is not necessarily to be helpless, or to be a victim. Mary was not forced. She chose to say “yes.” Choice is an act of strength. Mary exhibited courage in the face of vulnerability, which Gaventa correctly notes “is an unavoidable part of what it means to be a creature of God’s making.”¹² There are certain aspects of Christian spiritual life which are of necessity in passive voice. We do not act. We are acted upon. Michael Casey notes in *Strangers to the City*, his reflections on Benedict’s Rule, “...the spiritual life is not a matter of achievement but of being the recipient of God’s benevolence.”¹³ This requires passivity, an attitude of expectant openness, which is extraordinarily difficult for Westerners. Mostly we want to get busy and *do* something because that puts us, in our own eyes, in a position of power. We seem terrified of what we can only learn in weakness and waiting, by accepting our vulnerability.

In her vulnerability, Mary (and here I quote Houselander again) “was not asked to renounce anything, but to receive an incredible gift.”¹⁴ Her vulnerable humility allowed her, and subsequently us, to receive God’s extraordinary gift. Her vulnerability was what, in retrospect, led to the *Magnificat*. As you know, Mary is representative of the *Anawim*, the poor ones, the little ones. The word is from the Hebrew root *ani* meaning poor, humble, afflicted. The *Anawim*

¹¹ Carol L. Meyers, “Everyday Life: Women in the Period of the Hebrew Bible,” in Newsom & Ringe, 248.

¹² Gaventa 130.

¹³ Michael Casey, *Strangers to the City* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2013/2018) 76.

¹⁴ Houselander 11.

are not only the economically poor, the marginalized, downtrodden, afflicted, widows, orphans, and aliens which Hebrew scripture teaches are God's special concern, but those who could not trust in their own strength.¹⁵ In the final analysis, who can?

Recognition of our vulnerability does not make us weak. It makes us humble, therefore open to new ideas, to what comes next, to the future; it opens the door to hope. As H.H. the Dalai Lama suggested in conversation with Bishop Desmond Tutu "...if you remain humble, then there is the possibility to keep learning." He quoted a Tibetan saying uncannily applicable to Mary: "wisdom is like rainwater---both gather in the low places."¹⁶ Accepting vulnerability facilitates humility that, in practice, makes it possible for us to learn, deepen, grow. Frankly, it also puts us at the mercy of unknowing. So unless we are intractably foolish, we seek the wise counsel of others.

2. *Seek Community (Now who?)*

If acceptance of vulnerability suggests Mary's passivity, her seeking community represents an active response. St. Luke arranged his narrative so that immediately after the Annunciation, after "the angel departed from her," "Mary set out with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth." (1:39) Mary sought the community of another woman, in this case an older woman and family member.

In chapter 1 Luke introduced Zechariah and Elizabeth, that biblically paradigmatic righteous and childless couple whom Gabriel also visited and announced another unusual pregnancy. I suspect Mary seeks Elizabeth's company not only because she is a "relative" (1:36), "righteous" and lived "blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the

¹⁵ See Brown (et.al.) 141-142.

¹⁶ H.H. the Dalai Lama & Archbishop Desmond Tutu, *The Book of Joy* (New York: Avery/Penguin, 2016) 212.

Lord” (1:6), but because she, too, is has an out-of-the ordinary pregnancy. Post-menopausal Elizabeth is six months pregnant (1:36), so can give Mary practical advice. Mary stays with her three months (1:56), perhaps suggesting she attended, or was nearby, when John was born, and *then*, after some acquaintance with a newborn, in her own second trimester, Mary heads back up the Jordan Valley to Nazareth.

Because many women have done similarly, I like to imagine that the younger Mary went down to Judea and stayed to help her older relative with the ordinary tasks of life when the baby was born. In any case, in her own situation of crisis and change, Mary sought the community of a good, religiously observant older woman in similar circumstances. In meeting with Elizabeth, Mary’s own experience was confirmed; she received a blessing because of her own trust in God, as well as some practical information about pregnancy, childbirth, and newborns. Life is of a piece; the spiritual is not separate from the physical and bodily. This truth was stated succinctly by Thomas Merton: “A life is either all spiritual or not spiritual at all.”¹⁷

As her story unfolds, Luke is careful to tell us that Mary, in the company of Joseph, in the community of their family, also seeks religious community. She does not cut herself off from the rituals and traditions of her Jewish community of faith. In his article in *The Tablet* on Mary’s Jewishness, Edward Kessler asserts that we now take for granted that Jesus was a Jew, but “hardly ever do we think about Mary as a Jewish mother.”¹⁸ But the Gentile evangelist, Luke, stressed Mary’s rootedness in the Jewish community into which she was born. Both Elizabeth and Mary have their sons circumcised and named according to Jewish practice. (1:59-66/ 2:21) Luke writes of “the time...for their purification according to the law of Moses” and the presentation of Jesus to the Lord “as it is written in the law of the Lord,” (2:22-23) for which the

¹⁷ Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1977) 56.

¹⁸ Edward Kessler, “Do whatever he tells you,” *The Tablet*, January 3, 2009, 17.

Holy Family traveled down to Jerusalem where they heard both reassuring confirmations and dark predictions about their son. (2: 22-38). In fact, Luke says that “every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover.” (2:41-51) Part of the community that Mary sought was that of the “ordinary” liturgical life of her religious tradition.

Mary’s life depicts a fundamental fact of life: We can’t go it alone. Any serious experience of vulnerability teaches this. In face of change and crisis Mary depended upon and was embraced by an individual and the communities of her family and religious tradition. In theological meditations on Mary, Karl Rahner notes “We are those who have been called away from the loneliness and isolation of the individual, into the unity of the love and grace of God.”¹⁹ “God sees us, through the eyes of his creative activity, his grace, and his mercy, as members of a great community.” “...unique individuals as we are, we are loved by God only because we belong to all others and because they belong to us.”²⁰ Of this Mary is our model.

3. Ponder (Now how?)

When the angel departed, there ensued a passive dimension of Mary’s acceptance of vulnerability in which her question might have been “Now what?” It was followed by the more active response of seeking community in which her question might have been “Now who?” Perhaps paradoxically, the practical question “Now how?” is evident in what may be the most contemplative dimension of Mary’s response. At three points in the narrative of Mary’s motherhood Luke is at pains to tell us that she “pondered:” at the angelic greeting (1:29), at the visitation by the shepherds (2:19), and when Jesus said, in effect, “I wasn’t lost; I chose to be here in my Father’s house.” (2:51) In each case, Luke used a slightly different word, and the differences reveal the shadowiest glimpses Mary’s interior life.

¹⁹ Rahner, 31.

²⁰ Rahner 98.

When Mary ponders what sort of greeting Gabriel's is (1:29), the Greek word is *dialogizomai* (from which we get the English word "dialogue"). It can be used to mean discuss, argue, consider, wonder, reason, debate. It suggests an intellectual function. In response to the shepherd's visit (2:19) the Greek is *sumballousa*, which can be translated meet, encounter, discuss, confer or "put together for comparison."²¹ Is Mary pondering the various surprising experiences she has had to this point, comparing them as a way of coming to understanding?²² The word the NRSV translates "treasured" (2:51) which describes Mary's response to life with Jesus in Nazareth has as its root *diatepreo*: to keep, or guard, or treasure up. Like many mothers, Mary is protecting her son and treasuring the events of his childhood. The compound preposition with which the verb begins suggests carrying an action to a definite result.²³ This reminded me of something Rahner says in connection with God's plans for Mary: "God's plans are made with the end in view, God always envisages the whole."²⁴ I wonder to what degree Mary did.

We cannot know with any certainty Mary's inner life. If she shared it with anyone, the New Testament writers either were not privy to the conversation or chose not to record it. But the subtle etymology of Luke's words suggest a deepening, a movement from intellectual reasoning, to encounter and comparison, to guarding or treasuring what was understood. All this occurred in Mary's "heart," the central core of personhood which in the biblical world was not the seat of emotion, but of reason, volition, and will. The beloved Orthodox Bishop and teacher, Kallistos Ware reminds us the "In Hebrew anthropology...the heart is the organ with which we think. ...the heart does not signify the feelings and emotions.... The heart designates...the

²¹ Fritz Rienecker & Cleon Rogers, *Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan/Regency, 1970/1976) 143.

²² Interestingly the root transitive verb *sumballo* describes the way fields were sown, by broadcasting as it were.

²³ Rienecker & Rogers 145.

²⁴ Rahner 47.

inwardness of our human personhood in its full spiritual depth. ...the heart is the primary center of the total person, the ground of our being, the root and source of our inner truth.”²⁵

Of Mary’s reflective activity Gaventa writes “Mary does not wait passively for someone else to explain things to her; she takes an active part by thinking, reflecting, considering matters.” “...she is initiating Christian reflection.”²⁶ Apparently we have gotten it wrong. It is not Mary of Bethany who epitomizes Christian contemplation, but the Mary of Nazareth. In response to change and crisis, Mary ponders before she responds, reflects on her experiences, and treasures them in her heart.

In his monograph “Mary and the Mystery of Incarnation,” Andrew Louth observes that “what Mary bears in her womb she also ponders in her heart.” “The mystery of the revelation of the unknowable God in the Incarnation is apprehended in the *beholding* of the glory seen in the Incarnate Word: and Mary is the type of that contemplative wonder and adoration.”²⁷ “Mary,” Louth says, “stands beside me as one who helps me to contemplate the wonder of God disclosed in the Incarnation.”²⁸

4. *Trust*

Finally, as the other responses were stripped away, the very heart’s core of Mary’s response to change and crisis was trust. Trust. In our world we trust practically nobody, certainly not our governments and religious institutions, much less each other individually. We stagger mentally to understand trust as the sparkling and diamond-hard core of Mary’s response to God’s invitation. The English word “trust” is probably of Scandinavian origin: old Norse *traust* which

²⁵ Kallistos Ware, “How Do We Enter the Heart?” in *Paths to the Heart: Sufism and the Christian East* James S. Cutsinger (ed.) (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae Press, 2002) 7.

²⁶ Gaventa 130.

²⁷ Andrew Louth, *Mary and the Mystery of Incarnation* (Oxford: SLG Press, 1977/2002) 19.

²⁸ Louth 23.

came into old English as *treowe*, meaning “faithful.” (Wouldn’t it be hilarious if those marauding Vikings brought the concept of trust to the British Isles?) In our context, the first three dictionary definitions of “trust” sound remarkably Mariological: 1. “assured reliance on the character, ability, strength, or truth of someone or something;” 2. “one in which confidence is placed;” 3. “a dependence on something future or contingent.”²⁹ (x2) The One Mary trusted was and continues to be faithful.

Mary was assured of the trustworthiness of the One for whom Gabriel spoke. She depended upon God for her future which was completely contingent on the trustworthiness of the Promiser. “That is what faith is,” writes Caryll Houselander, “believing something because God has told us that it is so. // It is not believing something because we feel that it is true or because we want it to be true or because our reason/can encircle it. Truth would be a very small and petty thing if it would fit into our minds.”³⁰ The word “trust” is the secular cousin of our theological word “faith” which, in practice, means something like “believing in something we can’t prove.” Houselander’s meditation on Mary gives a more profound, and perhaps a shocking definition of “faith”---“believing something because God has told us that it is so.”

Do you remember what Elizabeth said when her baby “leaped in her womb” and she was “filled with the Holy Spirit” (Luke 1:41)? She blessed Mary with these words “...blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.” (1:45) The Greek root word of “fulfillment” is *teleios*: completion, perfection, successful result. Elizabeth doesn’t bless Mary because God’s promises to her have *been* fulfilled, but because she *believed that they would be*. Elizabeth blesses Mary’s trust in what God will do, even if at the moment, things are a bit uncertain, a bit shaky for both of them. Thomas Merton observed

²⁹ Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, 10th Ed (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc. 1994) 1269.

³⁰ Houselander 98-99.

“Mary’s chief glory is...the pure obedience of faith. She is blessed not because of some mythical pseudo-divine prerogative, but in all her human and womanly limitations as *one who has believed*. It is the faith and the fidelity of this humble handmaid, ‘full of grace’ that enables her to be the perfect instrument of God....”³¹ Mary is the incarnation of the definition of faith in Hebrews 11: 1: “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction [or assurance] of things not seen.”

In the face of change and crisis, Mary moved forward in trust: trusting God, trusting Joseph, trusting her family and community. Later she trusted Jesus to do something about the lack of wine! But at the outset, Mary exhibited blind trust in God. In the chapter *Fiat in The Reed of God* Houselander says simply “the remedy for fear is trust in God.”³² Absolutely true, and infinitely easier said than done. Beverly Gaventa writes that Mary “stands by, living out a simple and yet eloquent form of faithfulness.”³³ Standing by, not calling attention to herself, perhaps in that crowd around Jesus hearing “family” re-defined. Simple, not fancy or complex or fashionable or up to the minute. Eloquent. Paradoxically in her nearly complete silence in the New Testament, Mary is one of its most eloquent characters, one of its paradigms of faith and trust. “Her sanctity,” suggests Thomas Merton, “is the silence in which alone Christ can be heard, and the voice of God becomes an experience to us through contemplation.”³⁴

A Final Suggestion

“Then the angel departed from her.” (Luke 1:38) A beautiful *fiat* doesn’t guarantee a big dose of the “warm fuzzies.” Sometimes it leaves one utterly alone, and that sense of alone-ness is part of the totality of the offering to God, part of the abandonment to God whose ways are not

³¹ Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* 170.

³² Houselander 21.

³³ Gaventa 131.

³⁴ Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* 168.

our ways. I wonder whether when a soul has given itself totally to God, God then feels as if all is well with it, and thus moves on to another? What sort of God is this? The answer is that we can't completely know. But here is a suggestion: The departure of the angel, the sense of abandonment precisely when one turns to God and accepts the challenge of the Divine Will, is to preserve the mystery of God's person and procedures.

Ours is not a tit-for-tat universe. Good isn't always rewarded and evil punished. Perfectly innocent people suffer dreadfully. As the letters and diaries of saints and great Christians attest, taking on God's assignments doesn't guarantee one a sense of God's presence or consolation. Anyone who has read Mother Theresa of Calcutta's *Come Be My Light* knows this. Like the rain falling on the just and the unjust, God's love is a constant whether or not we "feel it." We don't earn or deserve it (although if anyone did, it was Mary). We certainly don't earn it by being good or obedient. God loves us no matter how we feel or what we do or don't perceive. As Carmelite Ruth Burrows has written, "God loves me, not because I am good but because he is good. ... God made me in order to give himself to me and he wants nothing of me...other than to let him love me, let him pour himself out upon me in everlasting joy."³⁵ The "given-ness" of God's love, which theology terms "grace," reminds us of how surface, superficial, and ephemeral emotional life is, how important it is to follow Mary's example and trust what we don't feel, can't see, don't understand.

Of course, God's absence can be only apparent. God is Being itself, so God can't be elsewhere. As Paul quoted their own poet to the Athenians; it is in God that we "live and move and have our being." (Acts 17:28; Epimenides) And yet, in an odd way, the angel's departure, (*aperchomai*), the *sense* of God's absence might be a gift. Angelic departures, God's apparent

³⁵ Ruth Burrows, OCD, *Guidelines for Mystical Prayer* (NY: Paulist Press, 1976/2017) 62.

absence might be ways of preventing us from falling into the theological tit-for-tat trap. It might be the way we are invited to a deeper surrender, a more complete acceptance, a more profound life lived in light of the mystery of God. It might be how the Divinity maintains its mystery. In his monograph on Mary, Andrew Louth writes, "...in the language of paradox, God makes himself known as unknowable. [God]...discloses himself as mystery."³⁶

The Virgin Birth points to the mystery or secret of revelation; it points to God's unveiling of himself by his veiling of himself in a human form. Mary... in her assent to the divine invitation, becomes the Mother of God; she becomes the veil that conceals God in order to reveal him. She brings forth for us the secret of revelation; she makes possible for us our access to that secret.³⁷

Thomas Merton expresses the same idea slightly differently: Mary's "sanctity is the silence in which alone Christ can be heard, and the voice of God becomes an experience to us through her contemplation."³⁸

It's ironic, but our perception of absence may be a by-product of the Incarnation which Mary facilitated. God comes among us to show us how, precisely by becoming fully human, God is so different from us. It is the embrace of our humanity that we so often avoid. Divinity takes it on in order to give it back to us perfected. Mary didn't avoid her humanity. All those fey depictions of our Lady in filmy gowns or the regalia of Medieval nobility get it desperately wrong. She had her body, her very young woman's body, to offer to God. And she offered it, put all its messy processes at God's disposal. Mary said "yes." Then the angel departed, and the corner of the veil of mystery which is the reality of Emmanuel, God always and everywhere with us, was lifted. The fullness of time had begun. The redemption of the cosmos had begun. "For with God nothing will be impossible." (1:37) To paraphrase dear, old Elizabeth, "...blessed are

³⁶ Louth 12.

³⁷ Louth 18.

³⁸ Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* 168.

they who believe there will be a fulfillment of what was spoken to Mary by the Lord.” (Luke 1:45)