

# Mary and Leda

John Burt

First Universalist Church of Orange, Massachusetts

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First I would like to tell two stories. The first is the familiar story from the Gospel of Luke, the story of the incarnation of Jesus, the annunciation to Mary, and the birth of the divine child in the manger in Bethlehem. Luke's gospel actually begins not with the birth of Jesus but with the birth of John the Baptist. An angel appears to the elderly priest Zechariah and announces to him that his aged and barren wife Elizabeth will conceive a child who will be a great prophet. Zechariah, like Sarah before him, is a little skeptical about this news, and this piques the angel Gabriel into striking Zechariah dumb until his child is born. (God is a little more gentle about this with Sarah. When she laughs at the idea of a woman her age—more than eighty—having a child, God says to her “What are you laughing about?” “I didn't laugh,” she replies, defensively. “Oh yes you did,” says God, who lets the matter drop there; but Sarah goes on to name her child Isaac, which means “laughter” in Hebrew.) Unlike her husband Zechariah, Elizabeth is delighted by this news.

Then Luke's Gospel goes on to give an almost parallel account of the annunciation to Mary:

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said “Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you!” But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and considered in her mind what sort of greeting this might be.

I'm always struck by how human Luke's Mary is here, not just in her very understandable fear of this thing that is about to happen to her without her say so, but also in the self-possession and self-control she shows in holding her tongue and keeping her wits until she can get to the bottom of what is really going on. We aren't often allowed access into the minds of Biblical characters. For instance, when Abraham is told that he must sacrifice his son Isaac on Mount Moriah, we never hear anything about his thoughts or feelings about this task (except insofar as they are implied by the comforting lie he tells to Isaac on the way up the mountain: “Where is the ram we are going to sacrifice?” Isaac asks; “Don't worry, God will provide one,” Abraham replies, not knowing that he is right about that after all). We are only given Abraham's actions, which speak louder than his thoughts anyway. And we never learn what Isaac thinks about it all, before or after. But Luke

puts Mary's tremulous and uncertain thought in the foreground. And indeed Luke ties the nativity story to Mary's thoughts far more closely than he ties them to anyone else's, even to God's. The pointed understatement of Luke's account also seems to reflect Mary's self-possession in this moment of strangeness. She does not cry out, nor does she tremble in horror or fear or even elation; she "considers in her mind what sort of greeting *this* might be." The angel hears her unspoken thought:

And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. he will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of this father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end. And Mary said to the angel, "how shall this be, since I have no husband?" And the angel said to her "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. And behold, your kinswoman Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For with God nothing will be impossible." And Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." and the angel departed from her.

Equally human and equally wonderful is the incident of Mary's pregnancy that follows in the book of Luke. Mary visits Zechariah and Elizabeth, whose story we have just heard, "And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and she exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the voice of your greeting came to my ears, the babe in my womb leaped for joy.'"

What's to notice in this passage is that Mary does not actually tell Elizabeth how it is with her; Elizabeth guesses the whole story from the fact that the unborn John the Baptist leaps for joy in her womb. Elizabeth's recognition of what is happening to Mary is as spontaneous and as joyful as John the Baptist's own sudden recognition of Jesus some years later. And Mary responds with that great psalm we call the "Magnificat," set in such glorious harmonies by all of the great composers:

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden. For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. And his mercy is on those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, he has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his posterity for ever.

Notice here that one of the lessons Mary draws from her experience is the Lord's preference for modest and simple people like herself, and his subversive distaste for the great and powerful, for Herod and for Caesar, both of whom the psalm implicitly threatens, and for the rich, who are sent empty away. Notice also that this great hymn is not spoken to the angel, or to Joseph, or to the multitudes, but to Elizabeth, who is in a similar position. It is characteristic of Luke's own modesty and humanity that this great psalm is not spoken to a crowd or even to God, but is in context a moment of intimate girl-talk between two pregnant women.

This same simplicity is characteristic of Luke's account of Jesus's birth.

And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to be delivered. And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Generations of hearing this passage read in resonant voices during December have somewhat obscured how simple Luke's writing is here, how un-grand the scene, how un-oratorical the commentary, indeed how much the focus is not on the grandeur of the divine birth as on the simple practicality of Mary's acts in the few minutes afterwards—who wraps him up from the cold and places him in the readiest to hand place for him to be comfortable. It's as plain as that.

Our usual celebrations of Christmas blend together all of the different Gospel accounts, and so we put in that barn the shepherds, the three wise men from the east, the angels, and of course as many mules and cows and sheep as the place will hold. In fact, no account puts all of these actors in the same place: there are no shepherds in Matthew's account, and no three kings in Luke's. Indeed, it's almost as if Luke has polemically put the shepherds, humble, ignorant vulnerable people at the bottom of the social ladder, in the place of those grand personages from the East, and in place of the gold, frankincense, and myrrh Luke's infant receives only the gawking homage of these yokels, who for all their ignorance nevertheless have a clearer idea whom they are dealing with than the wise men ever do, who depart for the East almost as mystified by their mission as they were when they came.

Luke's point here, a point made as much against Matthew as against the Roman Empire, concerns God's special intimacy with the humble and the oppressed. This is a point that is well worth impressing on our hearts on this day, the 71st anniversary of the birth of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., whose mission was informed by that same special intimacy with the oppressed. What is more, in Luke's Gospel we have a vision of the divine power as something generous and human, not as something grand and titanic. It causes us to rethink what power means. It is the power not of divine storms or of human conquests, but of human love, itself a divine gift, a power which changes the world not by overbearing the wicked but by transforming them. I think it is this message from Luke, where all of the moral intuitions one most admires in Christianity are most clearly set forth, which informed Dr. King's own mission and ministry, which sought not only to rally the oppressed but also

to redeem the oppressor by showing him that even he inwardly longs for some role other than that to which he seems to have given himself so gleefully, that even he longs to share a common moral world with those he believed he scorned.

Here is the famous passage from Luke's Gospel:

And in that region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them "Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will soon come to all the people, for unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased!" When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." And they went with haste, and found Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they saw it they made known the saying which had been told them concerning this child; and all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Let's compare another story with this one, the story of Leda, the queen of Lacedaemon, in ancient Greece. Legend records that Leda was raped by Zeus, who appeared in the form of a swan. Zeus' sexual penchant for mortal women is well known, and Homer makes it the subject of a great deal of low comedy. Why Zeus keeps appearing in these different forms—as a swan with Leda, as an ox with Europa, and a shower of gold with Danaë—is mysterious to me, but it probably has something to do with the danger to mortals of his appearing to anybody in his own form, as poor Semele, the mother by Zeus of Dionysus, learned the hard way. Leda bore several children by Zeus, among them Helen, and Clytemnestra. Leda's daughters married two brothers, Menelaus of Sparta and Agamemnon of Argos. Helen's elopement with Paris of Troy you all know about, and the war that followed. Clytemnestra's story is related: while Agamemnon was away during the Trojan war, she commenced an affair with his dispossessed cousin Aegisthus, and murdered Agamemnon in his bath upon the return of Troy. W. B. Yeats condenses the whole story in his sonnet, "Leda and the Swan":

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still  
 Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed  
 By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill.  
 He holds her helpless breast upon his breast  
  
 How can those terrified vague fingers push

The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?  
 And how can body, laid in that white rush,  
 But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?

A shudder in the loins engenders there  
 The broken wall, the burning roof and tower  
 And Agamemnon dead.

Being so caught up,  
 So mastered by the brute blood of the air,  
 Did she put on his knowledge with his power  
 Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?

Yeats thought of the stories of Leda and of Mary as somehow parallel, describing as they do not only mortal women who bear children by divinities, but also central moments of the cultural life of Europe: from the scene in Luke, the whole history of Christianity descends. From this scene between Leda and Zeus, the whole Trojan cycle of Greek story follows—the burning roof and tower are the towers of Troy, destroyed for the sake of Helen, who is engendered in this scene, and the death of Agamemnon will be at the hands of Clytemnestra, who is also engendered at this moment. In both scenes, according to Yeats, divinities, by impregnating mortal women, intervene in and transform cultural history. (Yeats is also fascinated by the iconography of both scenes, their traditional visual representation, seeing the swan in the Leda story as parallel with the way the Holy Spirit is portrayed in painting—although not in Luke’s narration—as a dove.)

One of the clearest differences between the two stories is that Yeats’ account, unlike Luke’s, is starkly terrifying. Yeats’ poem describes, in a flurry and rush so disorienting that it is a few lines before we even have a clear idea what is happening, a scene of sexual violence. The speaker has access neither to Leda’s mind nor to Zeus’s, but seems to stand at some distance from the action, watching it with both fear and fascination. Although the speaker has no access to Leda’s thoughts, it is clearly Leda’s point of view, not Zeus’s, that interests him. It is her confusion, her fear, her surrender, that the poet attempts to fathom, and Zeus’s motives, which are after all quite vulgar, don’t concern him at all.

Yeats goes out of his way to portray this as a scene of sexual violence—compare how abstract Mary’s impregnation is—because what stands out for him in the scene is how it treats sexuality as a kind of blood mystery, tied to our being as human animals, driven by forces of nature which are dark and grand and never fully to be fathomed by us. The sexuality of this scene is frightening and even disgusting, but it is also meant to be fascinating, a kind of glimpse into that dark place where life and death turn the wheel of eternal becoming. It is an awed beholding of a force deeper than our intellects and never to be comprehended, something dark but also great and terrible. It is a vision of sex not as the expression of tender affection but of that force that drives the processes of nature, what Dylan Thomas calls “the force that through he green fuse drives the flower.”

That this force is at once barbaric and grand explains in Yeats’ mind I think why Zeus appears as a swan rather than a man: this stark and certainly amoral power of natural process which he imagines as somehow permeating sexual feeling is at once above the human, something great although not good, and beneath the human, something that

is part of our animal nature but also something imbued with a kind of animal knowing deeper if less articulate than our everyday awareness.

The questions Yeats asks early on have the same grammatical form but mean opposite things. The question “How can those terrified vague fingers push The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?” asks wishfully whether there is some way in which Leda could have overcome the sexual violence of Zeus even as it concedes that in fact there was no such way; in her disorientation poor Leda is no match for Zeus, and even here she seems to be not only overpowered but also giving way, as if the question shades from asking whether it is possible for Leda to push Zeus away to asking whether, in the confused midst of it all, she really does fully want to push him away. In either case the implied answer is “no.” In referring to Zeus as the “feathered glory” Yeats sees him with some neutrality as amoral but terrible and magnificent, in the way that he imagines the Greek pagans saw their gods, and in roughly the way moderns now see Nature, which is never so grand as it is when it is sweeping human things aside, in hurricanes, earthquakes, or volcanic eruptions. Leda here in Yeats’ view feels that same mixture of terror and wonder that one might feel in a small boat during a storm at sea.

Yeats’ second question, “And how can body, laid in that white rush, But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?” pulls in a very different direction. It asks, in effect, “if Leda felt the heart of that swan beating as it pressed against her own heart, how could she not have known that that was the heart not of a swan but of Zeus?” The implied answer is that she could not but have known the answer to this question, and knowing it makes her different: she is not only someone victimized by Zeus, but also somebody who knows something that it is not given to most mortals to know; she is not merely somebody who has suffered violence at the hands of a divinity but someone who has looked upon and understood the chaos of the divine, the way Job does when he hears God’s tirade from the whirlwind, in which God does not justify what he has done to Job (how can he? He tormented Job only because he had made a bet with Satan, didn’t he?), but in which God, without justifying or explaining or defending himself in any way, merely unleashes a torrent of almost unmatched in the bible for its eloquence, and, given its amorality, for its strangeness.

Yeats’ final question at the end of the poem,

“Being so caught up, So mastered by the brute blood of the air,  
Did she put on his knowledge with his power  
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?”

is an extension of this second question. What Yeats means here is: We know now, that from this act sprang the Trojan War, and the murder of Agamemnon, the *Iliad*, the origin of epic, and the *Oresteia*, the origin of tragedy. But, he asks, did Leda, in that moment when she must have realized that this was Zeus and not a swan, also in some way see the same things? Did she in some way understand that history she was at the beginning of, did she have some knowledge not only of what was to happen but also of what it all was supposed to mean? It’s clear that this is not knowledge that Zeus intends to give her—he treats her purely as a victim—but it is knowledge that Yeats thinks possible that she might have been able to “put on,” to seize from Zeus in the midst of this rape, before he could

let her drop with the indifference all of the Greek gods show to mortals once they have what they want from them. Yeats doesn't know the answer to that question, but it's an important one anyway, since on it hangs the question of whether we ever really know the meaning of the violent histories, the rise and fall of empires and of ruling families, that we are all caught up in, and which the Europe of Yeats' own day was especially caught up in. And Yeats has in mind, with some anguish, the same question of our day: are we, too, only victims of history, or do we somehow learn its secret in the midst of its horror.

Yeats' vision here is ultimately a vision of what the German theologian Rudolf Otto called "the holy." Otto meant, in his 1917 book *The Idea of the Holy* to describe something central to all religious life, and he meant by it the pressure, felt in the emotions and in the sensibility as much as in the intellect, and felt in the spirit above all, of something utterly beyond our everyday concerns and our conscious knowledge. Otto called this thing the *mysterium tremendum*, or the numinous, something charged with power and strangeness, something always wholly other to ourselves but in whose presence we feel the magnetizing pull of absolute dependence, a dependence which inheres as much in awe and terror as in love and gratitude. When the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard describes the religious life he describes it as something which requires what he calls a "leap of faith," a risky and dizzying projection of one's self beyond the life of duty and impartiality we are normally called to live into a world both absolute and absolutely strange. "Each single Angel is terrible," says Rilke.

Whatever religion is, it has something of this element of the tremendous, that thing which the Hebrews called the fear of the Lord. Why fear should stand so near to reverence is hard at first to understand, because we naturally think of fear of the Lord as somehow barbaric and primitive, and we also think of inspiring fear as not a quality worthy of the God we would like to worship. Perhaps it is only a fact, a sad fact, of human psychology that fear is a part of the experience of the holy, something we might hope to outgrow, but are unlikely to do so. Or maybe it is only fear that requires us to step outside of our own plans and wishes and self-congratulation in ways that love and gratitude sometimes don't require us to: divine fear protects us from enwrapping ourselves wholly in "making nice" and in speaking pious truisms whose force has been made stale for us by repetition, a vice I cannot always say I have been free from and which is particularly endemic to progressive religious movements like ours. But that can't be the whole story, for even sterner religious traditions lose their grip on that absolute reality which fear of the lord is supposed to put one in the presence of, as one sometimes suspects when one watches conversion experiences that involve considerable weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth but also seem to have been read from a script. Indeed, even Yeats' grandest moments of terror and awe are all too often clouded by fakery and humbug.

The crucial difference between the story in Luke and the story in Yeats is not that the one is nice and the other is terrible. (After all, although the angel brings good news to Mary, we know that the shepherds find them terrible enough, even as they keep telling the shepherds not to be afraid.) The difference is that in the two stories there is a different relationship between the moments of holy awe and the ethical course of ordinary human lives. One of the most striking things about the Greek divinities is their moral indifference to the sufferings of human beings. The Trojan War is a spectator sport to the gods of

Homer's *Iliad*, and one feels about them roughly the way one feels about those cultivated Romans who read Plato in the morning but went to the Colosseum to see human beings eaten by lions in the afternoon. One feels awe for their power, but one is never tempted to feel respect for their virtue.

The Greek gods are finally metaphorized versions of the forces of nature, and ethics never arises from the merely natural, as one doesn't need Darwin to know. And worship of the Greek gods is finally worship of the forces of nature, which are grand and awesome but in no way moral; such worship is a kind of elaborate bribery in which one sacrifices calves for good harvests, or, in Agamemnon's case, sacrifices one's own daughter for favorable winds to carry one's fleet to war.

One cannot respect the Greek gods for the reason that they cannot die. Mortals have one life to live, and it matters intensely whether they spend that life well or poorly. But the gods have many lives to live, and no folly they commit costs them anything they can't get back in the next episode, because it is always open to them to try some other thing, having an infinite life to resort to. Zeus' many amours, Hera's many intrigues against Zeus, Athena's many wiles, have something of the empty repetitiveness of situation comedy, in which the same small plot devices play out with variations week after week. One way or another, Gilligan will always wreck the plan, and the crew of the Minnow will remain for another week on the island.

What is respectable about the God who appears in Luke is not that he organizes the world in a moral way, a way far different from the way the Greek gods organize their world. For certainly the world is not organized in a moral way, and to elaborate a theory of God which explains away the manifest irrationality of experience is to engage in a kind of special pleading which ought to be beneath the dignity of religion. At the same time, to respond to the irrationality of human suffering with the claim that there is no God is scarcely an adequate response either, since those who make this claim, like those who prove that everything that happens is a part of God's plan, substitute clever explanations for why things are for moral responses. (Why disbelief in God has been given such unearned prestige, as if it were a sign of superior sympathy with human suffering to tell those who suffer that their suffering is not only unexplained but empty, is beyond me, but that is also a subject for another time.) If you love God, you love the world even in the face of your anger with it, and maybe even in the face of your anger with him.

What is worthy of respect about the God who appears in Luke is that he does not merely manifest himself in a glory which makes the human appear small and empty. Quite the reverse: it is the mortals, those who die, those who have only one stake to place and who had better place it right, who are the center of the focus in Luke. That mortality has a greater dignity than power is the central theme of Luke. It is also the central theme of the work of Dr. King, who likewise taught the great the emptiness of greatness and the dignity of the human things they were most tempted to turn their backs on. So much is the dignity of mortals the center, that in Luke God himself strives to become one, to enter the world not in grandeur and terror, but as a little child, something weak, small, vulnerable, and above all needy. God experiences in Luke exactly the experiences one would think a God least likely to experience—the experience of weakness, of dependency, and of course above all the experience of death. For God's grandeur is not the ability to transcend weakness,

vulnerability, and death; it is the ability to render all of those things meaningful. It is the purpose of the incarnation to make the human being not the thing which the holy casts down before it, but to make the human being, even the human body, the place where holiness occurs. The Gospel of John tells us that God is love. But the Gospel of Luke, in having God become the most vulnerable and most needy of creatures, a human baby, tells us that we teach love by needing it.