

“The Irrational Calling”  
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus  
concerning Luke 1:26-55  
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco  
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I find it noteworthy that preceding the birth of Christ are two women’s stories, two women’s experiences, women’s speech, and women’s prophecy. Despite the centuries of men claiming women cannot preach the Gospel, the real truth of the matter is that the Gospel couldn’t even be born without a woman. Without the “yes” of a woman, preachers would have nothing to preach, no Messiah to share. Without the “yes” of a woman, the good news couldn’t get out into the world to begin with. Without the “yes” of a woman’s body and the expansive hospitality of her womb, there’s just not much of a New Testament for the men to write.

God needed a woman to make the Gospel happen. Women are the first to tell of Christ’s conception, and women are the first to tell of his resurrection, and without these women and their stories and their consent to God’s call, the men have nothing to preach. The original pulpit belonged to a woman, and her name was Mary, her name was Elizabeth, her name was Anna. After all, it was Zechariah, and not a woman, whom the Good Lord struck mute.

I do not say this to be disparaging of the men. I only say it to set the record straight. My main point here is not about gender. My point is about Jesus, and how Jesus is born wherever people are hurting or silenced or oppressed. Regardless of gender or nationality, when God arrives in the world, God situates God’s self among the poor, the broken-hearted, the oppressed, and the prisoner. God didn’t choose a woman simply because, conveniently, she had a uterus. God chose a woman because as someone undervalued by society, she was a vessel ripe for love.

The way God chose to appear in this world—a mere baby dependent on a mother’s milk—tells us a lot about the kind of God our God is. We have a God not enamored with power but a God who willingly gives power away. We have a God who is not impressed by wealth or by title or by prestige. We have a God who shows up amongst ordinary people and calls himself, “son of man,” or, “son of humanity.” This is a God who came to be with the people, and he came first through a woman, through a birth canal, through a process the theologians call kenosis, the self-emptying of God to become more like us humans.

Interestingly, this crazy, irrational choice to empty God’s self of divine power in order to become a baby was a remarkable act that required human partnership. In order to do it, God needed a human vessel—a woman—to carry the God-child, nurse him, cradle him, and change his soiled diapers. None of us, I might point out, would ever willingly choose to return to diapers. We only return to diapers by the necessity of illness or aging, but God chose it of God’s own free will as a way of saying to us all, “I am with you. I will share all your vulnerabilities, all your fragility, and all your humanness.” It was such a crazy scheme. Only God would do something so drastic, so self-less, so creative. Think how much God must love the world not just to send a messenger on God’s behalf but to *become* the message of love in the form of a tiny infant baby. How wild. How sincere. How strange and how loving.

Don't you know God must have wondered if this whole baby thing was going to work out? Surely God knew the plan was insane, that he'd probably get himself killed, that babies, while cute, seldom change the world. But God's love was so great and God's passion for being with us so strong that God couldn't settle for a halfway effort. God's desire not to dominate or intimidate but to join with and be among forced God to get creative. God knew riding in on a white horse with a crown atop his head wouldn't send the right message. Instead of the masses or the company of kings, it would be the midwife helping Mary push who would be the first to see God. She'd be looking for a different kind of crowning, listening for baby's first cry, ready with towel and basin to wash him. It would be the ordinary and the miraculous all wrapped in one.

God's crazy dreams require human participation. Thank goodness for midwives who can see God coming before anyone else can and call the dream forth. A good biblical word for a midwife is prophet.

When approached by God to join in the impossible, Mary, like most prophets, didn't mince with words. "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" Like Moses and Isaiah and Jeremiah before her, Mary doubted that she was up to the task. Like the prophets before her, she needed assurance. Like the prophets before her, God gave her a sign.

Mary's call was unique in that God needed her womb, but she certainly wasn't the only prophet God had approached through the years with strange requests. Ezekiel laid on his left side for 390 days, then on his right for 40. Isaiah walked naked and barefoot for three years. Hosea was told to marry a wife of harlotry. Moses was commanded to throw his staff on the ground so it could turn into a snake . . . and then, to make it worse, he had to pick up the snake by the tail so it would turn back into a staff. I'm not making this stuff up! Somebody might have made it up, but that person predated the Bible. In other words, Mary's call is really not so unusual as it is par for the course concerning the biblical prophets.

What did make her call unusual was not what she was being asked to do, but what God was going to do alongside her. The other prophets had done strange and silly things to help God make a point. Mary's acts would help God make an entrance. The earlier prophets had often spoken of God, but she would be the first to birth God right into existence among the people. There had never been anything quite like it.

I wonder, which do you find more impossible? A virgin birth? Or a God who chose infancy as the way to show up? I always think of God as the caller, not the called, but it is as if God tasks God's self with showing up for the people in a brand new way. In calling Mary, God was also calling upon God's self to become a child. How crazy, how insensible. Maybe the plan would be just mad enough to make a difference and to save the world.

Calls are often like that. They seldom make perfect sense, and they cause you to question your sanity. But try as you might to remain grounded in logic and reason ("How can it be, for I am virgin?") the holy nudge just will not leave you alone. It haunts you by day and wakes you up at night. It taps you on the shoulder incessantly when you try to focus on other things. It calls to you at odd hours and it knocks on your door even though you've turned out the lights and are

pretending no one's home. The call is never coercive. It's usually not even that persuasive. You only know it's a call because it is persistent or because perhaps your spirit recognizes Spirit.

Maybe God's call to become human came not from God's own mind but from the people. Maybe it was the decades and centuries of prayers that called God out into the world in the form of a child. Maybe the whole thing was even more of a partnership than we realize. Maybe God doesn't just call us. Maybe we call God. Maybe God models for us how to listen and how to respond. Maybe we model for God how to cry when our needs aren't met. Maybe it is a lifelong dance of deep calling to deep, as the psalmist would say, where God's song is my prayer and my prayer is God's song (Psalm 42:7-8). Maybe God inspires us, and we inspire God.

Maybe Mary's story is just the beginning. Maybe there's a midwife or a prophet inside of you just waiting to flourish. Maybe God will keep coming, and maybe you have just the eyes to spot it and help us see. Maybe the calling is frightening but maybe God is with you, and maybe, just maybe, nothing is impossible with God.

Friends, may God gift you in this new year with big imagination and the faith to believe in your dreams. In a world like this one it may seem irrational to follow your joy, to think that you can make a difference, to give birth to anything new, to think that God speaks to you and inspires you and gives you ideas. In a world like this one, it may seem irrational to hold on to love. But may you never shy away from the wild, irrational, magnanimous love of God. May it follow you everywhere.

Rejoice, rejoice, take heart in the night, though dark the winter and cheerless, the rising sun shall crown you with light, be strong and loving and fearless; love be our song and love our prayer, and love, our endless story, may God fill every day we share, and bring us at last into glory.