

## God's Will and My/Our Identity: Mary, Kermit, and Each of Us

Luke 1:26-35; 2:16-20,34-35 and John 2:1-11

March 04, 2018

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The challenges and conflicts of life draw close to us; and your and my self-identity influences how you and I engage life's challenges and conflicts. At the most, I was ten years old when I was taught and asked to memorize the first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism (written in 1647): "What is the chief end of human beings?" And the answer I was taught is: "To glorify God and enjoy God forever." For anyone from the Calvinist and Reformed or Presbyterian traditions rooted in Europe beginning in the 1550s, that question aligns with the theme of today's worship service on the third Sunday of Lent: "God's Will and a Person's Identity." The challenges and conflicts of life draw close to us, and your and my self-identity influences how you and I respond.

At the most, Mary was 17 years old when she became aware that a baby being born was in her near future. Here we are in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A story from the Bible exists in front of us. The story says that a young woman capable of being pregnant to full term perceives God calls to her through an encounter with a messenger sent from God. People can argue (and have argued) until the proverbial "cows come home" to the barn and until the cows are fed, milked, and turned back out to the pasture – (argue) with respect to how Mary's pregnancy physiologically occurs. The argument over "how" becomes a distraction from the human element of Mary's life and a distraction from the human element of your life and mine. Too much focus on Mary alone because she becomes the mother of Jesus of Nazareth, born in Bethlehem and dying in Jerusalem – (too much focus on Mary alone) distracts from Mary as a human being no different from you and me, in that every morning Mary waked up to particular challenges and conflicts in life, and her self-identity was crucial to her responding.

God's will is a slippery concept. To me, it's like trying to pick up with my fingers a spoonful of margarine that I intended to land in the skillet when I flicked the spoon with my wrist, but, when I missed the skillet, the margarine ended up on the floor. I can't pick up the margarine with my fingers alone. Neither can I successfully pick up "God's will" with my mind. What I can do about God's will is: (1) deduce God's desires from aspects of the rich tapestry of God's story through Scripture; and (2) deduce God's desires through observing in life other people's words and deeds which seem consistent with Scripture and which resonate within me and influence me. These influences shape my identity as a person of God like Mary was – which means that Mary is important to God and to history because she ponders and observes in life while her identity is being shaped by God's will, not that different from the way your identity or mine is being shaped by God's will. Of course, you and I are not pregnant with Jesus. We don't meet shepherds the night we give birth to Jesus and ponder what they tell about hearing heavenly voices. New mother Mary does that. We don't meet elderly Simeon when taking infant Jesus to the temple of the faith community to dedicate him to God; and we don't hear Simeon tell us that the future of this baby will be filled with God's love and yet dark with pain because of opposition to that love. New mother Mary does that. We don't attend a wedding almost thirty years later when the supply of wine runs out before the guests run out of energy. We don't ask Jesus to solve this embarrassing problem, because we think he brings some problem-solving capability to the situation. His mother Mary does that. On a Friday two years later, we don't agonize as we witness Jesus' death upon an instrument of execution owned by the Empire, or attempt at dawn on Sunday to visit his grave. His mother Mary does that.

At the most, Mary is 17 when she understands a baby will be born to her in less than a year. At the most, Mary is 18 when she hears absolute strangers who are shepherds tell how they heard her son was exceptional and extraordinary; and she is still no more than 18 when she hears an old man in the faith community – whom she's never met – tell that Jesus' exceptional and extraordinary life embodying God's love will yet be dark with pain from opposition to that love. At the most, she is 46 when she thinks Jesus might be able to help a bride and groom avoid terrible embarrassment. At the most, Mary is 48 when she witnesses Jesus' agonizing death on Friday and attempts on Sunday to visit his gravesite.

The branch of the Christian faith called “Orthodox” (as in Eastern, Greek, Russian, and Arminian Orthodox) refers to Mary, the mother of Jesus, as “theotokos” – “God bearer.” With no disrespect intended to the Orthodox or their term for Mary as “theotokos,” let me suggest that you and I and all of God’s people are God-bearers to the extent that – like Mary – we also are people to whom God calls. We too are pregnant – metaphorically and poetically speaking – with the power of God’s love in the ordinariness of events in our lives, where birth, growing up, growing older, facing challenges, facing conflict, facing suffering and pain, facing death and burial are parts of life! And, in life’s ordinariness every day, we are metaphorically and poetically pregnant with the possibilities of God’s extraordinary love! Like Jesus’ mother Mary so long ago, we too are claimed from and have within us a gift of God’s love to be God-bearers through it all – challenges and conflicts every day: Theotoki/ae we are!

Saying how “We are theotoki/ae – God-bearers,” let us remember that we also have said, “The challenges and conflicts of life draw close to us, and your and my self-identity influences how you and I respond to life’s challenges and conflicts.” We’ve talked about this with our eyes on Mary, the mother of Jesus, as an example. Think with me briefly about what Mary of Nazareth has in common with Jim Henson’s 20<sup>th</sup> century creation – Kermit the Frog. In 1979, Paul Williams and Kenneth Ascher wrote “The Rainbow Connection” as a major song for “The Muppet Movie,” a story of Kermit’s journey from obscurity in his watery-swamp-home to the fame of Hollywood. The song mentions three possible ways to understand what rainbows represent in life’s larger context: (1) First is the “materially rational” or exclusively scientific way: “Rainbows are visions and only illusions, and rainbows have nothing to hide. So we’ve been told, and some to choose to believe it.” Compared with Mary of Nazareth, we might say, “Some say there’s a pregnancy; and there were jars of water, and there was more wine; and there was the body of a son buried in a borrowed grave; but there was nothing more, unless you believe in illusions. (2) A second way of understanding rainbows is the “fantacist” and supernaturalist way of believing. Again, from Kermit’s song: “Who said that every wish would be heard and answered when wished on the morning star? Somebody thought of that, and someone believed it.” Compared to Mary of Nazareth, we might say, “Some say the pregnancy was miraculous and supernatural completely, as was the water miraculously becoming wine and as was Jesus’ miraculously being raised from his grave. Completely miraculous and supernatural! Somebody thought of that, and someones believed it. (3) A third way of understanding rainbows is “life as a journey” in which identity and purpose are discovered here and there along the way. Kermit sings, “Someday we’ll find it – the rainbow connection – the lovers, the dreamers, and me . . . all of us under its spell . . . Have you been half asleep? And have you heard voices? I’ve heard them calling my name. I’ve heard it too many times to ignore it. It’s something that I’m supposed to be.”

Paul Williams and Kenneth Ascher in 1979 may have been saying something similar to Scripture and to the Westminster Shorter Catechism’s question #1. You don’t have to be exclusively either (1) an advocate of materially rationalistic and “purely scientific” thought, or (2) an advocate of the absolutely miraculous and supernatural (closer to fantasy than real-life). What if Scripture is saying of people as far back as Mary of Nazareth (and earlier), and saying of people who today sing the lyrics made popular by a muppet frog: “Life is a journey, including challenges and conflicts – many challenges and conflicts – in which identity and purpose are discovered along the way”? If Scripture is saying this, we can say that God’s will is revealed day by day – not for our certainty – but through our growing awareness of our identity and purpose being theotoki/ae – being bearers of God’s love: loving God and enjoying God with all of God’s people, even through challenges and conflicts, which are so many we cannot count them. You, too, have heard God’s voice calling your name. You, also, have heard it too many times to ignore it. It’s something you’re supposed to be” – a bearer of God’s love, daily serving and celebrating how, in the ordinary, God’s will for love extraordinarily shapes your life (and mine) with all others, who themselves also can hear their name called for a journey shaping us together for who we are supposed to be: Theotoki/ae – bearers of God’s love. – All honor and praise be to God.