

Seriously, How Can This Be?

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In the mid-90's there was an angel craze. There were angel books on how to find your special angel, and other books about how to talk to angels and how to hear them talking to you. I loved everything angel. To be truthful, I never discovered my own personal guardian angel—even though I tried everything to talk to it. Over time, I got rid of all my angel books, but I hung on to my angel cards. I've carried them with me for over 30 years and sit in my office today.

How can it be that angels talk to us?

How can it be that there are EVEN angels?

I have no idea. But I have heard stories of “angels” appearing out of no where to help someone with a broken down car, and then disappearing after they were out of danger. Seriously, how could that be? I don't know.

The Bible, as you know, is full of talking angels. I am not saying that the Bible is a good source to use as verification for the existence of angels, because it is full of some other weird things that I am pretty sure don't exist, like talking donkeys (see the story of Balaam's Donkey in Numbers 22), werewolves, unicorns and of course virgin births.

In the birth narratives of Jesus, angels are all over the place. One such talking angel appeared to Mary to “announce” she was chosen to bear the light of the world, the savior of the nations and Messiah of the Universe. While it might be interesting to wonder about who or what exactly is this talking angel, I am much more interested in Mary's response to the angel's somewhat troubling news.

Mary has most often been stereotyped as a submissive and willing vessel of faith. A humble, meek and mild servant of God. According to the lore surrounding her, the angel tells what will befall upon her, and she accepts it, gratefully, with Big Joy.

C'mon, seriously, how can this be?

I think the “Blessed Virgin” has been sanitized and diminished throughout church history~~in fact, Protestants have pretty much ignored her vital presence in the story of faith. Mary, my friends, has moxie—in spite of all the powerlessness of women in the ancient world.

Biblical scholar Dr. Wil Gafney highlights the context of Mary's life: *“There is a moment in the Annunciation story when an ordinary girl on the cusp of*

womanhood is approached by a powerful male figure who tells her what is going to happen to her body, in its most intimate spaces.”

Just sit with that, Dr. Gafney urges.
Sit with this young woman.

I did.

I’m not so sure the angel news is all great tidings for Mary. In fact, she takes pause.

Dr. Gafney notices, *“Even in the Iron Age in an androcentric and patriarchal culture, [Mary] knows her body belongs to her. She doesn’t ask what her intended will say, what her father will say, what about the shame this would likely bring on her, her family, and their name. Instead she testifies to the integrity of her body under her control. In her question, How can this be?” [it is as if Mary is saying], Since I have not done and will not do what you are suggesting—just in case you are really here to defraud me and my intended—how will this thing work?”*

In her question, “how can this be?” suggests she has a lot of questions, and has NOT given any consent to God to use her body as an incubator, even if it is for the Messiah, and this is a special honor. She doesn’t fall for it. She knows what a pregnancy out of wedlock might mean for her. (e.g. death by public stoning....)

Seriously, how can this be?

Dr. Gafney sees Mary’s question in light of the Me Too Movement (a collection of stories of sexual assault and harassment.) She wonders, *“It is in this moment between this is what you will do, what will happen to and in your body,” and submission to what she accepts as God’s will that I ask, Does Mary say, ‘me too’? Does she have a choice here?”*

The biblical narrative and world that produced it may well say no. That is what makes this a “me too” story to Gafney.

A close reading of this text shows that Mary has little agency in her world, and yet, Gafney notes, she is *“‘sufficiently empowered’ to talk back to the angel of God, determine for herself, and grant what consent she could— no matter the power of the One asking. And so, in that moment after being told by someone else what would happen to her body, she became not just the Mother of God, but the holy sister to those of us who do say, Me too.”*

I think this is an important distinction. That, in between her “how can this be” and “may it be so” Mary challenges God. She knows the unlikelihood of an unwanted pregnancy going well for her. But even in her lack of agency, she still was able to find her voice to offer a challenge, and then summoned a shred of dignified consent in spite of in the end, not having control over her own body.

Mary becomes a holy sister not only in the Me Too movement, but around matters of having autonomy over one’s body~~or lack thereof~~which for women, looms large as reproductive health rights crumble in everywhere. When a “Proud Boy” posted “Your Body, MY Choice” on social media after the election, the situation is grim. Mary. Holy Sister, indeed.

Holy Mother Mary of Moxie.

Somehow, in the in between of “how can this be?” and “may it be so” Mary becomes an earth sanctuary for the holy. In spite of it all. I am not surprised—because the same moxie that offers challenge to God is also the place where she is able to say, well, of course, I am worthy and enough to bear the Hope of the ages.

Throughout the years in the orthodox church, iconographers and sought to portray the many facets of Mary. I love the icon on the cover, “Holy Mother Wider than the Cosmos”. The sparkle of the stars and planets swirling around her pregnant, swollen belly speak of the unknown beauty and expansive possibility wrapped up in the anticipation of birth.

Philosopher Brian Swimme and historian Mary Evelyn Tucker reflect on the story of the universe:

...With our empirical observations expanded by modern science, we are now realizing that our universe is a single immense energy event that began as a tiny speck that has unfolded over time to become galaxies and stars, palms and pelicans, the music of Bach, and each of us alive today. The great discovery of contemporary science is that the universe is not simply a place, but a story—a story in which we are immersed, to which we belong, and out of which we arose.

This story has the power to awaken us more deeply to who we are. For just as the Milky Way is the universe in the form of a galaxy, and an orchid is the universe in the form of a flower, we are the universe in the form of a human. And every time we are drawn to look up into the night sky and reflect on the awesome beauty of the universe, we are actually the universe reflecting on itself. And this changes everything. [1]

Holy Mother Mary of Moxie is also Mother Wider than the Cosmos. She is the story of the universe, of using what agency she has to ask the questions. She is

the story of drawing forth her exquisite self, in all of her humanity, to become an earthly sanctuary for God.

She is our Holy Sister, who shows us the way to all that is within us, as well. We are the questions. We are the challenge. We are the cosmos. We are the incarnation. We are the sanctuary in which God can find the room to grow and become and be born.

Seriously, how can this be?
How can this be us?

I don't know exactly.

Maybe, we are in the pause moment between how can this be and may it be so. Pregnant with concern, fatigue, hope, confusion, wonder, anger, grief, and hopefully a little bit of moxie.

Well, at least, I am in the pause moment, that in-between fullness of everything and I have no idea if and how life will work out.

I do know, though, that I am carrying, in the midst of unknowing, a seed of Holy Love. You are too—an earthly sanctuary giving room for the Light of World, the Hope of all Ages in spite of everything, and I mean everything. It will be born—through you, through me, through each other and among us.

Seriously, how can this be?
I have no idea.

But...
May it be so.
Amen.

SOURCES

<http://www.wilgafney.com/2017/11/26/did-mary-say-me-too/>

Brian Swimme and Evelyn Tucker, Daily Devotional, Center for Contemplation and Action, <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/the-universe-story-is-spiritual/>

Sam and Malcolm Gordon, Hey Mary, <https://malcolmgordon.bandcamp.com/track/hey-mary>