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“Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord” (Luke 1:38).

*Isa 7:10-14; Luke 1:26-38*

Language evolves by usage and can be quickly modified by media associations. A good example is the way Margaret Atwood’s 1985 dystopian novel, “The Handmaid’s Tale,” took on new, dramatic power as an online series in the midst of the #MeToo movement.

So, when we read in Luke’s account of the Annunciation that Mary calls herself the “handmaid of the Lord,” we find ourselves sorting through the many historical and biblical associations that have shaped the meaning of the word. Biblical figures like Sara and Rachel had servants called handmaids who cared for their needs and were also offered to their husbands as surrogate mothers.

Handmaids were the lowliest of household servants, trained to respond to the slightest movement of their mistress’ hands, and to be “at hand,” ready to serve at a moment’s notice. Luke’s uses the word to describe Mary to emphasize her humility and alertness to God’s prompts. Mary’s response to the angel’s message begins with the word “Behold,” the equivalent of the phrase used by the prophets when called: “Here I am.” Her assent is open-ended and absolute.

Mary will conceive, carry and give birth to Jesus, but she will also raise him with Joseph, helping to form his human personality and understanding of the world. Her attitude toward service can be seen in his readiness to take the lowest place. When Jesus washed the feet of his disciples at the Last Supper, he was taking the

equivalent of the handmaid's role in the household hierarchy. His lesson to the Apostles was shockingly made and unforgettable. If they wanted to be leaders, this was to be their model.

At a time when humble servant leadership is sorely lacking in our power- and status-hungry culture, Mary's example, which even Jesus followed, is one of the gifts of Christmas to us.

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