

Illumination and Annunciation

Luke 1:26-38

December 5, 2021 *Advent 2 - Watching for the Light series*

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In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a young woman engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The young woman's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! God is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I have never been with a man?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; hence the child to be born will be called the Holy One of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be beyond childbearing. For nothing will be impossible with God."

Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Holy One; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

This passage is a famous scene, the angel's pronouncement, which the church has called, "The Annunciation." Here is one of my favorite pieces of art depicting this scene. "The Annunciation" by Henry Ossawa Tanner. The first African-American artist to receive international acclaim. The son of a minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Tanner specialized in religious subjects. In this painting he created an unconventional image of the moment when the angel Gabriel announces to Mary that she will bear the Son of God. Mary is shown as an adolescent dressed in rumpled Middle Eastern peasant clothing, without a halo or other holy attributes. Gabriel appears only as a shaft of light. It is large – 6 ft x 7 ft. painted in 1898. Here is a Divine messenger, Divine light, with an announcement, an annunciation, an invitation that seems impossible. How does art impact our understanding of this story?

I came across Denise Levertov's poem, *Annunciation*. In it, she asks

*Aren't there annunciations
of one sort or another
in most lives?*

*Some unwillingly
undertake great destinies,
enact them in sullen pride,
uncomprehending.*

*More often
those moments,
when roads of light and storm
open from darkness in a man or woman,
are turned away from
in dread, in a wave of weakness, in despair
and with relief.
Ordinary lives continue.
God does not smite them.
But the gates close, the pathway vanishes.*

The suggestion that we all have annunciations, of divine invitation feels like a stretch sometimes. I keep thinking about the difference between last December and this December. December 2020 in the midst of the Covid 19 pandemic - When life and the church were quiet and we had very little was on our calendars. Was I more open to divine invitations? And now in this December when more is happening in life and the church and the world, am I likely to miss a divine invitation? So often when I end my days with watching the news in open-mouthed horror and sorrow, it feels a bit farfetched for me to imagine being invited by the divine into something extraordinary.

But imagine this is true. Imagine that we are. (Because it is. We are).
Imagine for a moment how we might greet these annunciations.

Many people, this poem suggests, do great and valuable things in life without any awareness of or appreciation for it. They go through life unaffected, oblivious to ongoing unfolding story of Divine healing and reconciliation in the world and in their lives.

Others come to their annunciation moments with definite awareness, and so also fear and trembling at the terrible toll that risking will likely take on their equilibrium. They back slowly away from the moment of change and choice, turn away and sit back down in their perpetual risklessness, preferring the delusion of safety, the illusion of inertia, to radical trust. And often these people do not get to be part of the marvelous things beckoning them to life, a deeper life, a fullness.

But Mary. She was open and ready when God's Yes came.
God said, I am about to do the unfathomable. You, Mary, will be in this with me. And she met the moment with her heart open. She saw it for what it was, and she heard the Angel Gabriel when he told her, "Do not be afraid."

What is it to say Yes to God's yes? To meet your annunciations when they come?
To allow yourself to take them in - to be taken in - with bewilderment, curiosity, willingness, and courage?

In response to the annunciation, Mary asks a question - How can this be? Explaining to her celestial visitor the biological impossibility of the thing he is announcing. It is impossible. But impossibility is how God always chooses to come.

Nothing is impossible for God, Gabriel answers Mary.

And Mary says Yes. She says Yes to becoming the mother of Love Incarnate.

In her sermon on this passage, Rev. Kara Root offers this insight.

There's a saying in NVC – non-violent communication, that we've studied a bit around here – that every No is a Yes to something else. When someone tells you No, they are saying yes to another thing – whether they are needing space, or autonomy, or have made other plans with someone else - there is always a Yes somewhere inside the No.

I want to suggest the opposite is true as well, for us finite creatures. There is always a No inside our Yeses. When we say Yes to something, we are saying No to other things – every other option, in fact. Yes to tacos means we're not having soup. Yes to marrying this person means No to other people and paths. (1)

When we say Yes, especially to God, Divine Mystery, we are called to renounce something. We must let something go. To let it die. Something we've thought our life would be or already was, something must die, part of our ego, our false self, the narratives we tell ourselves.

Most often what dies was not really giving us life to begin with, we only thought it was. But sometimes we are called to let go of good things. Things that are giving us a good life, making us happy and stable.

Mary was engaged to a kind and decent man, about to start her life. A good life. A happy, ordinary, stable life. And when she says Yes to God, all that disappears. Mary is being pulled into God's drama of redeeming love of the world, and it means she is no longer going to be who she was. The Annunciation could very well be called The Renunciation. Gone is the life she had embraced for herself, the path so neatly laid out before her, she renounces it here.

Jan Richardson's poem, "Gabriel's Annunciation," begins with these words,

For a moment,
I hesitated,
on the threshold,
For the space
of a breath
I paused
unwilling to disturb
her last ordinary moment,
knowing that the next step,
would cleave her life,

that this day,
would slice her story
in two
dividing all the days before
from all the ones
to come (2)

How vulnerable it is to let go of all that gave your life meaning and purpose and order and jump into the unknown like this! But she does, she lets all of it go in order to participate with God in something bigger.

Don't be afraid, the angel says. Not because suddenly everything will be steady and safe. It's decidedly not safe, and it's most certainly not steady. It's absolutely risky and will for sure change everything. Don't be afraid because the one who calls you is God. You are held in God's love, joined in God's purposes.

Maybe the angel could have said, "Keep watching for the light in your life and in the world. God is turning the world upside down and you are part of that in big ways and small ways."

That is our theme for Advent. How do we see Divine light each day as we ponder the birth of Jesus this year? And what kind of annunciations might be happening in us? To us? What does that even mean - that God is doing something greater, and that God might interrupt our lives and call us into it?

Perhaps the invitation to you this week is this, What would it be to go through your week assuming God is alive and active in the world? What if you lived this week like this is true?

But let's go one step farther, if you're willing, and say, not only is God alive and active in the world, God is inviting you – specifically you – to participate in God's schemes. You don't know when or how the invitation will come, but your annunciation, that is, your belovedness and chosenness in God for a purpose, is as real for you as it was for Mary. There will be specific callings just for you. People who come across your path, a phone call, a question, an opportunity you will recognize, a vulnerability you're invited to share.

Will your moments be lived be grudgingly or unaware? Will you recognize the cost and back away from the invitation? Or will you open your heart and life and join in what God is wanting to do through you?

We do not say Yes to God alone – we are given each other, given to each other, and there we find God – in words and acts of kindness and healing and hope that pull us out of ourselves and the minutia of our self-absorbed worlds, or out of our fear about the general state of things, and into action, along with the God who is already always acting.

So, perhaps your call this week is to imagine God is alive and active. Or perhaps it is to anticipate annunciation and say Yes when it comes. Or maybe, it is to step into your own renunciations and let go of what keeps you from Yes. In any case, you are held in God's love, joined in God's purposes. Keep watching for the light. Amen.

This sermon was inspired by a sermon by Rev. Kara Root, "Don't Be Afraid," Dec. 15, 2019

<https://kara-root.blogspot.com/2019/12/luke-126-38-this-is-famous-scene-angels.html>

1) Root

2) Jan Richardson, "Gabriel and Mary," Dec. 19, 2014

<http://adventdoor.com/2014/12/19/advent-4-gabriel-and-mary/>