

## ***PICTURING THE ANNUNCIATION***

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December 8, 2019, 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent - Non-Lectionary Sermon

Luke 1:26-56

***“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.’”***

– Luke 1:30-31

We Protestants are people of the Word: hearing and speaking the good news is essential to who we are. Most sermons are “wordy” in just that way: but not today. Today’s sermon is more visual. Yes, I *am* preaching on a biblical passage: the story of the Annunciation from the Gospel of Luke. But I’m going to be using a picture to help us dig into it: the painting called, “[Annunciation](#),” by the contemporary American artist John Collier.<sup>1</sup> There’s a reproduction of it on the back cover of the bulletin.

In this sermon, what you see with your eyes is just as important as what you hear with your ears. So, you’ll want to keep your bulletin handy, so you can really examine that visual image.

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First of all, let’s make sure we all understand what the word “annunciation” means. It’s an old-fashioned word for “announcement.” In Christian art, a

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<sup>1</sup>See [http://www.hillstream.com/prints\\_Collier\\_Annunciation.html](http://www.hillstream.com/prints_Collier_Annunciation.html)

painting of the Annunciation depicts the dramatic moment when the angel Gabriel appears to young Mary of Nazareth and tells her she's going to have a baby — and we all know what a very special baby it is. It's Jesus Christ, of course, and the way this all comes about is through a miracle of the Holy Spirit.

Collier's painting may look a little shocking to you at first. What's shocking to most people, the first time they see it, is how young Mary appears. "Why, she's little more than a girl!" you may say to yourself. Her clothing looks vaguely like a Catholic schoolgirl's uniform, complete with a pair of saddle shoes.

In fact, Mary's age in this image is rather true-to-life. In biblical times, it was common for a girl of fourteen or so to be married: and that's about how old Mary looks to be in this painting.

Think about that for a minute. God entrusts one of the most important tasks ever given to a human being — the birth and nurture of Jesus, son of God — to a girl no older than a first-year high-school student. Now, most of us, if we consider high-school girls we know, don't want to even think about any of them getting pregnant — let alone climbing up onto a donkey midway through her ninth month and traveling a hundred miles or so to a strange village she's never seen!

This girl Mary is emotionally strong enough — once the neighbors notice that new roundness in her belly — to endure the jeers and catcalls in silence.

When her beloved Joseph, her betrothed — the man who'd promised to marry her and make a good life with her — grows strangely distant as he wrestles with whether or not he ought to break the engagement, Mary endures that, too. She's no shrinking, delicate flower, this Mary. She's strong and tough and self-reliant, despite her tender years.

What's more, this angelic vision Mary receives is so real to her, she manages to hold onto it through all the long months of her pregnancy, all the emotional anguish as she wonders whether she'll lose Joseph — and with him, her honor (at least, in the eyes of her fellow villagers).

Now, look again at the figure of Mary in the painting, that skinny teenage girl in her saddle shoes. *This* is the one God has chosen? Surely it's true, as the famous hymn puts it, that "God moves in mysterious ways."

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So, why do you suppose John Collier decided to portray Mary this way: as an American schoolgirl?

He did it, I think, because he was consciously trying to stand within the tradition of Christian paintings down through the centuries. The Annunciation has been depicted again and again in Christian art. It's one of half-a-dozen or so biblical stories most frequently painted. In virtually all of them, the artists portray

Mary as a young girl who appears to come from their own culture.

Collier created this painting for a Roman Catholic church in Texas. He meant it to be seen by worshipers, who would — if he'd done his job faithfully and well — come to see themselves in it.

Take a look, now, at the illustration on your bulletin cover. What you've got in your hands is a woodcut of [The Annunciation](#) by the German artist Albrecht Dürer.<sup>2</sup> He made it around the year 1510: and everything you see in that print belongs to his own era. Dürer's depicted Mary as a German girl of the late Medieval or Renaissance era. The sort of dress she's wearing is not the costume you'd see on a Jewish peasant girl of the first century.

Quite the contrary: it's the clothing of a well-to-do woman. You can see that also in the background of Dürer's woodcut. That elegant canopy bed — that displays the monogram of the artist — is not something a peasant girl would have owned.

This is so very typical of Christian art. The artist's highest goal is to re-create a biblical story in such a way that ordinary people of his or her own day can enter into it. In pursuit of that goal, the artist starts with an image so familiar, the

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<sup>2</sup>See

<http://www.art.com/products/p14178989-sa-i2954210/albrecht-duerer-the-annunciation-from-the-small-passion-series-1511.htm?aff=conf&ctid=1005595778&rfd=139879&tkid=15058133&>

viewers will instantly recognize it.

By that reasoning, it makes a certain amount of sense for John Collier, in the year 2000, to paint Mary in a school uniform with saddle shoes. He's standing in the tradition of Christian artists in every age, who did much the same thing with the backgrounds and buildings and costumes of their own day.

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Before you set the Dürer woodcut aside, though, I'd like to point out a few more things in the picture. As artists down through the centuries have depicted the Annunciation, they've developed a sort of visual code — a set of obligatory symbols that help viewers know what it is they're looking at.

Remember: for most of Christian history, the great majority of believers didn't know how to read or write. When they went into their churches, they depended on devotional pictures like these to refresh their memories of what they'd heard in the biblical stories.

The first of these coded images is the book Mary has opened on the reading stand before her. Tradition says it's the book of the prophet Isaiah, and the verse Mary's reading is the fourth verse of the seventh chapter: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel" (that's the King James version).

Now turn over to the Collier painting. You can see a book there as well. Mary's holding it in her hands. But Mary's not looking directly at the book. No, she's looking over the top of it. Follow her line of vision: her eyes are locked on the eyes of the angel.

There's also a potted plant in most of these Annunciation paintings. A lily, to be precise. You can just barely see it in the Dürer woodcut, down front (I know the reproduction's pretty small, but take my word for it, it's there). The lily symbolizes both purity — appropriate for a young, unmarried girl like Mary — as well as the resurrection of Jesus (a bit of foreshadowing of the gift the world will one day receive as a result of this pregnancy).

The lily is, of course, very prominent in our modern painting — right down front.

A third prominent symbol is a dove, symbolizing the Holy Spirit. You can't miss it in the Dürer woodcut, descending from on high. It's a literal rendering of that line from Luke: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you."

Now take a look at the Collier painting and see if you can find the dove, symbol of the Holy Spirit. It's not easy to find. It's very small: but, take my word for it — it's there. Can you see it?

It's way off to the upper right of the picture. You'll see there's a little corner of a roof jutting out. It belongs to the house next door. Sitting up there on the roof is a mourning dove.

This dove's not doing any descending or overshadowing, that's for sure. But that's the artist's prerogative, to interpret the story for his own age. As a twenty-first century artist, Collier wants to portray the work of the Holy Spirit a whole lot more subtly than Dürer did, back in the sixteenth century.

Most people of our time are more comfortable imagining the Spirit working in a subtler, more interior fashion. The distant dove, surveying the scene the edge of a rooftop, is a fitting symbol of that. Any overshadowing of the girl, Mary, in Collier's painting is happening inside her, psychologically, as she struggles to comprehend the news the angel's just delivered.

There are a couple more visual cues present in the Collier painting that go beyond traditional Annunciation paintings. To me, they're the features that make his painting especially interesting.

Look where Mary's standing. She's on a doormat. On the one hand, a doormat is something you'd expect to find outside any typical American house; but, on the other, there doesn't appear to be much in this painting that's accidental. The artist appears to have thought long and hard about every detail he's painted

into it.

To me, a doormat symbolizes transition. It's a sort of threshold. Leaving or entering our homes, we cross the doormat with hardly a second thought; yet, as we do so, we're making a transition.

This is a transitional time for Mary of Nazareth — probably the biggest transition of her life. As the angel Gabriel shows up at her doorstep, she knows she's on the threshold not only of womanhood, but also of her life after this revelation.

Take a look, now, at the door. Notice anything special about it?

The door is closed: a rather odd circumstance, if indeed it's happened that Gabriel has just rung the bell (you can see a tiny doorbell there, by the way, if you look real hard). You'd think Mary would have stood in the doorway and spoken to him, or maybe invited him in. But, no. Mary has stepped out of the house and shut the door behind her. It's almost like she's closed the door on her past. It won't be long at all before she and Joseph will set out from Nazareth for Bethlehem, to meet their destiny. For this courageous young woman, there's no turning back!

There's one more little detail I'd like you to notice: Mary's dress. First of all, it's a deep blue — the traditional color of Mary's clothing, through much of Christian art. But look at what's happening to it. It's blowing in the wind.

Where did that wind come from? The angel's robes aren't blowing: and he's standing right beside her. To look at them, you'd think he's standing there in the Texas sun at high noon, with the air hardly moving at all.

Not so for Mary. The wind is starting to move her frock, ever so gently. The wind of the Spirit is starting to blow into her young life, and she'll never be the same again.

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So, what should we do with this ancient story of the Annunciation? Perhaps these two pictures, by Christian artists working 500 years apart, supply a hint. Perhaps they help us, in some small way, to leap over the intervening centuries and get into the mind of Mary: to sense the sheer terror the angel's message must have brought into her young life. Yet, along with the predictable fear, there's something else going on with Mary. That something else is faith.

It's only by *faith* that the likes of you and me are enabled to believe the good news of Jesus Christ. His coming into our world is intrusive, still. His call to serve punctures the calm of rural lanes; of suburban neighborhoods with carefully-tended lawns and well-swept patios; and even bustling urban streetscapes. It shakes up our otherwise well-ordered lives. The call of God is never what we'd asked for or expected.

Yet, once it happens... once we catch a hint of the nearness of angels... once God speaks to us, with all the gentleness and subtlety of a noontime breeze stirring the folds of a girl's frock, there's only one thing we can possibly do. It is to say, along with Mary, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

This Advent, may you not only hear the timeworn and beloved tale of a Savior's birth. May you also see, with your own eyes, signs and hints of the Holy Spirit's work in your own life!

Let us pray:

**Paint us a picture, God, this Advent:  
a picture not of humdrum conventionality,  
but a scene that — though some aspects of it may shock us —  
gently and winsomely invites us in.  
There may we take our place  
beside faithful women and men of generations past,  
who, amidst the dailyness of life,  
had their ears tickled by angel-song,  
their hearts moved by a righteous vision  
of what the world can become  
if only we, its human inhabitants, heed your voice.  
We thank you for Mary:  
for her courage, her determination, her steadfast faith.  
Most of all we thank you for Jesus: her son and yours,  
born in a stable long ago,  
and reborn on the doorsteps of our lives  
each time we cease our struggling  
and step through the doorway into a new beginning.  
This Advent, Lord,**

**we open our hearts, our hands, our lives to you. Amen.**

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