

Bringing God's Love into the World

Fourth Sunday of Advent, December 20, 2020

Church of the Ascension, Chicago

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The word of the LORD came to Nathan: Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall establish the throne of his kingdom forever. 2 Samuel 7:4b5a,12-13

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord 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 the Lord 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 am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son 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 barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her. Luke 1:26-38

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you.

Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus.

Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

One of the most profound moments of my life took place this past week – twenty-five years ago – in a doctor's examining room. Brooke and I already knew that she was pregnant. We had been to Walgreens, if you know what I mean. But now came the confirmation.

The doctor moved a sophisticated stethoscope over Brooke's abdomen, then paused, eyebrows rising, smiling. Then she turned to me and said, "*Come here. Listen.*" And I heard the speedy, whooshing, miraculous heartbeat of our first child, our son Eliot, 10 weeks *in utero*. I became over-shadowed by joy and wonder and panic, all at once.

Brooke was blessed with a normal, healthy pregnancy. Not only that, but the blessings of our families and society were fairly well assured by the fact that we had been married for four years. The hospital where Eliot would be born had a state-of-the art birthing center. He came home to a picture book, cozy nursery.

Circumstances were not nearly as reassuring for a young girl named Mary, who was to become the mother of Jesus. She was unwed when an angel, uninvited, came to announce God's plan for her. Her fiancée would no doubt want answers. Also the rabbi. Everyone knew of *those* instructions in the Law of Moses. Depending on circumstances and interpretation, unmarried women who became pregnant were to be stoned to death. (e.g. Deuteronomy 22:13-30) That code may have been rarely enforced, but imagine the fear. And the gossip.

We should therefore not be surprised that Mary is introduced here in the Gospel of Luke as *perplexed*, or, actually, *much perplexed*. Life as she knows it, everything previously familiar and predictable and hoped for has suddenly been thrown into question.

Along with *much perplexed* Mary also *pondered*. The author wants us to see, I believe, that this is no shallow soul. Her mind and heart work together in search of clear understanding. Mary "... *pondered what sort of greeting this might be.*"

Before we can see where Mary's pondering may have taken her, the angel seizes the initiative, painting a compelling picture of her unique favor with God – favor that will result in her giving birth to an incomparably great son – '*son of the Most High,*' in fact. He will rule unendingly on the mighty throne of David! As you may have heard, and as Mary may have known, the angel is directly quoting from Nathan's prophesy about the reign of King David that we heard in today's first reading, from 2nd Samuel.

Mary does not appear to be so quickly taken in. She must have known that as a woman – no, as a *girl* – she was forbidden from speaking her mind aloud about religious matters. But Mary can't stop herself from interrupting and challenging this archangel! "*How can this be, since I am a virgin?*" These are Mary's first words in the Gospel of Luke. *She is questioning God.*

The angel honors Mary's bold challenge, telling her about the Holy Spirit and being overshadowed by the Most High. The proposal must have seemed metaphysically convincing, or at least plausible enough, but knowing the story as we do, we should note that the angel left out a lot – starting, for instance, with an inhospitable birth far from home, and soon after a prophecy about Mary's own heart being pierced.

We don't know exactly how Mary pondered all this. But when she gives the angel the 'yes' that was sought, she appears to take full responsibility for it: "*Here am I, the servant of the Lord; Let it be with me according to your word.*" She seems to have believed that she had a choice.

Mary is arguably demonstrating what psychologists today call differentiation, recognizing and claiming one's own path, come what may. Differentiation typically suggests separation from well-worn conventions and the expectations of others and life as one has always imagined it would be. Carl Jung deftly illustrated differentiation in his autobiography, when he wrote, "*Often I had the feeling that in all decisive matters I was no longer among men, but was alone with God.*" Notice and imagine the aloneness of Mary in the six words with which today's gospel passage ends: '*Then the angel departed from her.*'

This arguably lonely moment may strike a chord for all who have felt so alone, so much of the time, for so long in 2020. Perhaps we can take comfort from knowing that Mary knew or knows what it's like when the angel has left you. At its best, though, our all-alone time now may give us an opportunity to ponder and gestate revelations or vocation or whatever may seem to come from the Most High.

This Annunciation story has such a hallowed place in the devotion and imagination of the Church that we may shy away from pondering connections like these between Mary and ourselves. We are inclined to safely quarantine Mary's *yes to God* in the confines of Scripture.

Even so, let's ponder for a moment which of us may have said yes if we had been in Mary's situation. Or, to up the ante, what if we ask how and why you or I *do say* yes or no when the annunciation comes our way. Because, if our theology and the practice of our faith are on the right path, we *are all*, in fact, in Mary's situation. She is not merely a novel exception. She is as well an example. God does call each of us to give birth to God, if you will. God does call each of us to gestate and bring forth God's mercy, and love, and desperately-needed justice and desperately needed word of salvation.

Admittedly, few if any of us will ever be visited by an archangel. Most of us must prayerfully cultivate a specialized stethoscope that allows us to seek and hear the sometimes elusive whooshing thrum of the Spirit in the heart of God. If and when we hear it, count on some pondering. Count on some resistance. Ask questions. Count on feeling all alone at times. You've been given the message: Blessed are you, and called, with Mary, to bring God's new life into the world. *Amen.*