

“The Annunciation”

Isaiah 61:1-3; Luke 1:26-38

Mary – Mother of Grace



We can hardly turn on the television or glance at the newspaper without getting inundated with the latest bad news. Gloom and doom seem to lurk around every corner. I doubt things are really as bad as some would like us to think (yes, bad news sells.) But still, it takes some effort to put away the fear, even if just for a short time. We wish we knew better what the coming months hold in store for us. We are facing unknowns that threaten to terrify us, paralyze us, and rob of us whatever peace of mind we might have enjoyed. Sometimes it can be hard to pinpoint the source of our anxieties, but not now. The question that faces us all is how we will respond to the fears and anxieties that seem to be sweeping our nation. Where will we turn for reassurance? In whom will we trust?

Talking about our fears may seem to be an odd way to approach the season of Advent, but consider Mary’s “Advent” and how it began. She is an engaged but yet-to-be-wed virginal young teenager, when an angel from God arrives and tells her that she is pregnant. Despite the angel’s reassurances, Mary knows quite well the difficulties that will arise from the announcement of her pregnancy. Just try to put yourself in her place and then read today’s passage from Luke.

A “frightening” announcement

The simple, holy dignity of Luke’s gospel is evident throughout this passage and it will repay a slow reading. Luke opens his gospel (Luke 1:5-25) by telling us how the angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah, an old priest going about his duties. That would certainly be a frightening experience; there is a reason the angels always say, “Be not afraid,” when they show up.

Gabriel told Zechariah that his wife, Elizabeth, would bear a child, to be named John, who would “make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” This child would grow to be John the Baptist.

When Elizabeth was six months pregnant, her relative, Mary, was visited by the angel Gabriel. At the time, Mary was engaged to a young man named Joseph. Mary would probably have been 14 or so at the time. Her engagement to Joseph would have been completely binding, so much so that had Joseph died before their marriage, Mary would have been considered a widow.

Gabriel tells Mary that she is favored by God. As I’d guess most of us would be, Mary is perplexed and disquieted, even fearful. But she becomes reflective as she considers what the angel’s greeting might mean for her. Gabriel comforts her and then tells her something that makes no sense whatsoever to her. Mary is going to bear a child, and not just any child, but the “Son of the Most High” who will sit on David’s throne. Mary’s reflections turn to the immediate question of how this could possibly be. She is a virgin! How could she possibly explain a pregnancy? What would everyone assume, even Joseph? Gabriel tells her that the baby will be born by the power of God. The word “overshadow” (v. 35) translates the Greek, *episkiazo*, and carries the sense of God’s holy presence, as in the cloud that “covered” the tabernacle (Exodus 40:35). There is no sexual nuance here at all. Gabriel then tells Mary that her relative, Elizabeth, is pregnant, even though Elizabeth was very old and had been unable to bear children.

I’m sure that Mary must have found all this too much to comprehend. But Gabriel reminds Mary that “nothing will be impossible with God.” Notice that Gabriel uses the future tense, echoing Jesus’ later declaration, “What is impossible for mortals is possible for God” (Luke 18:27) A barren woman can have a child. A virgin can conceive. God can come to earth as a child. A person can be resurrected. All of these are incredible claims, but with God, the impossible becomes possible. And these seemingly impossible acts of God happen to and through the most ordinary of people. Mary was just a young woman in a small, insignificant town, in an out-of-the-way Roman province. Gabriel didn’t visit a queen or a princess; instead, it is the obedient, worshipful response of this pious girl that enables God’s story to move forward.

The Name of Jesus

Though we often take names for granted, in the Bible names are very important. Biblical names were readily understandable and were often translatable sentences. God’s revealing of his name to Moses was a momentous event

in the story of the exodus (Exodus 3:13-15). Sometimes, God would even change a person's name to convey a new meaning, such as changing Abram's name to Abraham (Genesis 17:5).

Mary is told that her baby's name is to be Jesus. "Jesus" is simply the Greek form of the Hebrew name, Joshua, meaning "Yahweh [God's name] is salvation." Matthew tells us that the baby is to bear this name because "he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21).

The name, Joshua (or *Yeshua*) was a very ordinary name in Jesus' day but, of course, given here to a most extraordinary person. The angel Gabriel tells Mary that Jesus will be called "the Son of the Most High," a striking title, and that he will sit on David's throne, where he will reign over God's people (the "House of Jacob") forever. Indeed, Jesus' "kingdom will have no end." All this is in keeping with promises God had made to King David nearly 1000 years before. Jesus, this baby to be born to Mary, is the promised but long-awaited Jewish Messiah, who would usher in God's kingdom on earth.

When we are scared

Fear & faith. We sometimes tend to think that doubt is the opposite of faith, but Fred Craddock reminds us that it is fear, not doubt, that is the opposite of faith. Part of this is a language problem.

We translate the Greek word, *pistis*, as "faith." Regrettably, though *pistis* has a verb form, "faith" does not. No one says, "I faithed yesterday." This is too bad, because Bible translations use "believe" as the verb form of "faith," even though "believe" speaks to a state of mind, including an opinion. Similarly, "doubt" refers to a state of mind. But the best synonym for "faith" is "trust." Faith speaks more to matters of the heart than does belief. It is not so much, "What do you think?," as it is "Whom do you trust?" Doubt is a "head" word," but "fear" and "faith" are both heart words.

Fears test our faith, whether it is the fear of job loss, illness, failure, or anything else in our extensive catalogue of worries. The question is whether we will hold tight to God and to our confidence that we are his, the sheep of his pasture. Faith is no guarantee of an easy or worry-free life; God has made us no such promise. But it is faith for which we have been made, a people created in God's image who are to know God and enjoy God forever. And it is in the lived faith of disciples that we can find the peace that passes all understanding and the confidence that one day God's mercy, justice, and healing will transform our world and each of us. Let us be more like Mary, who in the face of frightful perplexity, simply said, "Let it be with me according to your word" (Luke 1:38).

Jesus Makes a Stunning Announcement

Last week we learned that John the Baptist proclaimed the coming of the Messiah, the one who would usher in the arrival of God's Kingdom. This week, our text is taken from Isaiah, a prophet who lived hundreds of years before Jesus, whose words were used by Jesus in making a stunning proclamation of his own.

In Luke's gospel, after Jesus' baptism and confrontation with Satan in the wilderness, he returns to his hometown of Nazareth to begin his public ministry. Luke (beginning at 4:14) tells us how Jesus went to his synagogue and rose to read from the scroll of Isaiah. Jesus unrolled the scroll to today's passage from Isaiah. Jesus read portions of this passage and announced that these words had been fulfilled! Wow! In doing so, Jesus announced that he was the anointed one, the Messiah promised long before, the one who would inaugurate God's kingdom. Jesus went on to imply that even Gentiles would be welcome in God's kingdom. Little wonder that Jesus was chased out of town – after all, who did this hometown boy think he was. But . . . why did Jesus choose this passage? What does it mean for us?

God's Kingdom Come

Many centuries before Jesus, when God had first formed his people, he had made a covenant with them -- he would be their God and they would be his people (Exodus 6:7; Jeremiah 30:22). God promised them the restoration and renewal of all creation in the kingdom of God. He promised them a savior, a Messiah, who would usher in God's kingdom. Indeed, still today, each week when we pray the Lord's Prayer, we pray that God's kingdom will come, on earth as it is in heaven. Today's passage from Isaiah is one of many Old Testament word-pictures that try to help us see what God's kingdom is like.

In God's kingdom, the brokenhearted are healed, captives are set free, those who mourn are comforted – all this is truly Good News to the oppressed. In God's kingdom, swords will be beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks (Micah 4:5). The blind will see, the deaf will hear, and the mute will speak (Isaiah 35:5-7). The prophets of the Old Testament spoke long and clearly about the coming of God's kingdom. In his teachings and actions, Jesus taught and showed people what God's kingdom is really like. He healed the sick, he made the blind see – all that is wrong with this world will be healed. Jesus hung around with the outcasts of Jewish society to demonstrate that everyone is welcome in the people of God. He showed people that God's kingdom is a present reality, though not yet in all its fullness.

A New Day

In Advent, we celebrate the coming of Jesus, the Christ, the Messiah, the anointed of God. When Jesus rose in the synagogue to read from Isaiah, he wasn't simply making some interesting theological point, he was proclaiming that a new day had dawned. For the rest of his earthly life, Jesus showed the Jews a new way of being the people of God so that they might truly be the light to the world. We have the same responsibility to be God's light, to do all we can to build a world in which God's will is done, to bring about the marriage of heaven and earth that we pray for each week. But in seeking after this divine marriage, we are not on our own. Jesus is Emmanuel (Matthew 1:23), meaning "God-with-us." The Holy Spirit is our "comforter" and "advocate" (John 14:26 & 15:26). The new day is a day of comfort and peace and joy. It is a little ironic that the stress of the holiday season can make it so hard for us to embrace the peace of God's kingdom. We ought to catch our collective breath and see the reality of God's kingdom in the look of unbridled joy on children's faces, in our efforts and gifts that help and serve others, in the personal relationships that we cherish, and in all the goodness of this life.