

Philippians 4:4-7

Gospel Reading: Luke 1:26-38

word count: 2.058

Where Mark gives us a bare-bones Gospel, Luke follows with great elaboration. Luke likes angels. Angels appear from the beginning of his gospel, even creating the first of what will become a tradition of air-traffic control issues at Christmas; this time, over the Judean hills where angels fly thick, clustered as heavenly host singing to shepherds below. Luke's inclusion of angels, gender-neutral and mysterious, makes him the "Patron Saint of Angelology" today. Winged ceramic figurines with mouths permanently shaped in round "o's" singing Gloria? Blame Luke. Re-runs of "Touched By an Angel"? Luke again. If you like angels, you are sure to like the Gospel of Luke. And, I've made sure to stuff as many of them as I can into the sermon today.

The angel Gabriel has been asleep for five hundred years—we haven't heard from him since he brought news to Daniel. He appeared to him as someone who, the story goes, "looked like a man." Now, he appears by an altar where incense is burned, and tells the priest Zechariah that his wife Elizabeth will give birth to a son, whom we know as John the Baptist. Zechariah does not believe the news, so Gabriel tells him that he will not be able to speak again until the child is born.

A few short verses later, Gabriel comes before Mary in the scene known as, "The Annunciation." In most art of the Middle Ages where a Cult of the Virgin began and flourished, Gabriel arrives appearing to have changed his gender—Gabriel is feminine and gentle in bringing the news. Perhaps this is a clue for how we are to treat transgendered people around us today—as those who carry more, not less of an understanding of humanity than we ourselves can comprehend.

Think of any number of paintings you have seen of the Annunciation. There is a common theme. Mary is alone—either in a garden, signifying purity, or in her home near her bed, symbolizing a place of impregnation. The angel leans forward with the news. Above, there is a white dove, suggesting the spirit, and sometimes, golden beams come down upon Mary, indicating that the event is upon her.

Gabriel, an androgynous angel, typically appears in a womanly guise, sometimes mirroring the facial features and posture of Mary. The mystic Meister Eckhart even notes that in their modesty, there is a sense of wonder being shared between their two worlds.

And what is that sense of wonder? A little later, I want to ask you what an annunciation means to you after this past year. What angel, metaphorical, human or otherwise, brought you news that changed you instantly?

Luke elaborates further on Mark's story, and places it in a context familiar to a Greek culture. A hero is the child of a union between a God and a virgin—thus a hero who would save his people, would assume this familiar context. Except—this "hero" would show a new way that was antithetical to the common understanding of what was expected of someone who was called upon to be a Messiah to his people. Jesus would not use power and might, but compassion and love, and his would be the message that would win—ultimately if not immediately.

Prison chaplain Jerry Goebel writes, "Only Luke gives us a real view of the young woman named Mary. This sets Luke's gospel apart from the others. Not being Middle Eastern (he was probably Macedonian) and also a gentile; Luke doesn't have the same anti-feminine views prevalent in both of those cultures at the time of Jesus. As a result, it is Luke who is free to give us many intriguing insights into the women that touched Jesus' life. It is from Luke's pen that we learn so much about Elizabeth, Anna the prophetess, the anointing of Jesus' feet in the house of Simon the

Pharisee, the sisters of Lazarus, Martha and Mary, as well as Mary Magdalene. It is from Luke's pen that we learn that many of Christ's disciples were indeed women and not just men."¹

Today you heard the story of the Annunciation. Gabriel approaches Mary—the white dove waits above ready to descend, and we are brought into the wonder of the moment. We watch the story unfold—of course there is a sense of mystery, knowing that Mary will take in what she has been told, and we will hear the words in verse 38: “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.”

We are spectators to this literary device—when great news comes, it is delivered by an angel, and in almost every instance, this appearance is accompanied by the words, “Do not be afraid.”

But what is the annunciation that Mary is receiving? She is set apart from Joseph for a year to prove her virginity before they can live together as husband wife. What is this news, but a death sentence? When discovered to be pregnant, Mary will surely be either taken to the door of her father's house in shame, or to the edge of the village, thrown off an embankment in order to break her bones and ensure that she could not run away, and then stoned to death.

Is it any wonder that this young girl of thirteen or fourteen was “perplexed and pondering?” How would I respond if it happened to me?

How do you respond to news that shakes you to the core?

See—annunciations have come to you in a very real sense; overpowering information and pronouncements that are life changing. When the angel comes in whatever form it takes—a friend, a loved one, the phone call in the middle of the night, the doctor's prognosis, the knock on the door from the uniformed presence—you are required to take in the news and respond. Maybe not at first—but when the news sinks in, you have a choice in how you answer.

First, there are annunciations full of joy—even within this room, new life is stirring, waiting to be born. Advent is alive and real right here in the watching and waiting we share with you who await a first child.

But there have been other annunciations just as life altering—bringing change to your lives and sitting with you long past when the angel is supposed to depart and leave you in peace. Have any of you ever had the experience of waking up feeling fine, and then suddenly remembering the presence of a great grief or worry, almost as if it is sitting at the foot of your bed?

In this season of joy, we look around our world and see so much that is not joyful, and when we want to celebrate peace, once again this year, there is none to be had. Our Nobel Peace Prize winner stood in Oslo last week under the symbol of a white dove while receiving his prize. In today's reading foretelling a Prince of Peace, Mary rests under a similar white dove. Yet, the annunciation this past week in such an unlikely place was that sometimes, it is *war* that brings peace. We have heard that before... and on the occasions when it is actually true, it comes at such a price. Will this time be different?

Because, being a part of a church such as this invites us to share our lives in community, we are aware of the annunciations of this year—how do you live as a person who has to adjust to the loss of a spouse, or for that matter, any loss of a loved one this year?

The struggle to live after the diagnosis has been delivered by the angel in our midst whose job it is to look after our health and well-being is not far away from the news that Mary receives from Gabriel.

The prayer requests that come back to the prayer chain reflect so much that is deeply felt, and reveal that there are people amongst us at any given time who are moving through tremendous issues that go far beyond this room.

Privacy and pride after message meets receiver means that there are some this year who are simply going without and struggling on their own with employment and insurance issues, debts, and a silence within that prevents them from asking for help.

News—hard news that promises to change everything—is often delivered by angels in our religious tradition. And perhaps it still is. One of the primary missions of angels is to offer people understanding in spiritual matters. We simply cannot see with clarity into spiritual realms without spiritual help from those who love us. Again, because we intentionally choose to live in community by being a part of a church, the angels are the people sitting around us right now.

So—I guess I'll ask those of you who have had a particular angel deliver news to you this year. How are you responding to the particular annunciation that has been given to you? It is hard, isn't it?

Writer and former Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor says, “Like Mary, our choices often boil down to yes or no: yes, I will live this life that is being held out to me or no, I will not; yes, I will explore this unexpected turn of events, or no, I will not.”

You can say “no” to your life, Taylor says, “but you can rest assured that no angels will trouble you ever again.”

And then she takes a bold turn by finding a new metaphor in the story that calls for courage on our part, if we say “yes” to our lives: “You can take part in a thrilling and dangerous scheme with no script and no guarantees. You can agree to smuggle God into the world inside your own body.”

How are you bearing God into this world?

This is a season of watching and waiting—as Christmas arrives, I am filled again with the sense of awe and wonder that I am a part of this story that makes all things new again, as we find new life in the story itself. Are we partakers of a theology that tells us that this is all being done for us if we but say or profess the right things, or are we people who see truth past the literature and into the here and now through how we answer the sudden and overwhelming annunciation?

Mary heard news that could condemn her to an early death. She responded, “Here am I.”

Taylor says, “If you decide to say, “no,” you simply drop your eyes and refuse to look up until you know the angel has left the room and you are alone again. Then you go back to whatever it is that is most familiar to you and pretend that nothing has happened.”

If you say, “yes,” you agree to take on what has been given to you, trusting that you will not be alone in bearing it out until the time has come. If you say, “yes,” you participate in bringing the light into the world and reflecting that light into the people and places that need you most. You can agree to smuggle God into the world inside your own body in how you reflect love and compassion back to a world in pain.

You can smuggle God into the world in how you refuse to take part in actions that cause more misery, even death, working for peace, equality and understanding.

You can smuggle God into the world in how you overturn the structures that diminish others for any reason, but especially in how you give and receive the love that is all around us.

The great mystic Meister Eckhart, said, “We are all meant to be mothers of God. What good is it to me if this birth of Jesus takes place unceasingly but does not take place within myself? And, what good is it to me if Mary is full of grace if I am not also full of grace? What good is it to me for the birth of Jesus if I do not also give birth to him in my time and my culture?”

Mary heard overwhelming news. The angel said, “Do not be afraid.” Take courage.

Mary heard astounding news. She responded, “Here am I.” Say, “yes.” Amen.

Sermon Resources

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Scripture for Sunday, December 13, 2009

Philippians 4:4-7; 4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. 5 Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. 6 Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Luke 1:26-38

26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, 27 to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." 29 But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. 30 The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32 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. 33 He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." 34 Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" 35 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. 36 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. 37 For nothing will be impossible with God." 38 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.



Dante Gabriel Rossetti's pre-Raphaelite painting of the Annunciation features his wife, Christina Rossetti as the model for Mary. Christina Rossetti was a writer, and author of the well-known words to the Advent hymn, "In the Bleak Mid-winter."