

Annunciation

November 29, 2000 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

Rev. Daniel A. Smith

Texts: Luke 1: 2638

I wonder how many of you were surprised to hear our reading today and whether any found yourselves thinking, isn't it a little early for that one? Kind of like I felt on Thursday when my daughter Nellie proposed, as she has never done before, that we play Christmas music at our Thanksgiving dinner? We know that waiting is often the watchword for the Advent Season which begins today. Waiting and with it a watchful vigilance! I usually love it but this year, Nellie is not the only one feeling tired of waiting and tired of all the watchfulness too. Waiting and not seeing family and friends, waiting for tests and test results, waiting for a vaccine, all while maintaining vigilance in our protocols of mask wearing, social distancing and limited gatherings. We're beyond ready for some good news and holiday cheer! I wonder if this Advent may call for a different focus. And so, I'd like to propose another watchword for this first Sunday of Advent: Wonder. Waiting and watchfulness, yes, but can we also ground ourselves in wonder, wonder at the sheer beauty and power this holy season, wonder at today's story of the Angel's call and Mary's response?

When I learned that we would be introducing this new banner, entitled *Annunciation*, by the artist Janet McKenzie, I knew I couldn't wait to share today's scripture on which it is based. Here at First Church, we usually wait to hear this familiar story until fourth Sunday of Advent or at Christmas Eve. But for many Christians around the world, we're about 8 months late to the party. For Orthodox, Catholic, Anglican and Lutheran Christians, the Feast of the Annunciation is traditionally celebrated on March 25.

For some of you raised in such traditions that are steeped in Maryan devotion, just hearing this story may spark a sense of comfort and familiarity. Maybe it reminds you of something you've been missing here at First Church. After all, in churches like ours, Mary doesn't get much mention outside of Christmas. And so, for others of you, hearing about the angel's hailing of Mary may conjure a certain discomfort, maybe even a subtle sense of suspicion, and I don't mean about all those prayers on the football field. Perhaps it's rooted in an unexamined, culturally-conditioned 'Protestant privilege,' or in some anti-Catholic prejudice, if not an unwitting concern that any elevation of Mary will lead us down that slippery path to 'Mariolotry,' that is, to an idolatrous worship of the blessed virgin. We don't talk about these different perspectives much, insidious as they are. Yet whatever our various "traditions" around Mary may be, there remains an abiding sense of wonder and wisdom in this Annunciation story.

Of course, the story is called *the* Annunciation because the angel announces the birth of Jesus to Mary. Yet it's not the only one. There are several times in scripture when the birth of a VIP merits such angelic heralding.

Biblical preludes include angels delivering the news about the birth of Ishmael, Isaac and Samson and, just a few verses before our passage, an angel visits the all too skeptical Zechariah with news of the coming birth of John the Baptist. But our story for today alone is considered the Annunciation; it is *the* announcement and Gabriel, *the* announcer. It's because this is more than just breaking news for its time! It's in-breaking news for all time -- the great scoop that God's divine, in-breaking Love draws near and pierces the veil that separates divine and human, spirit and flesh, heaven and earth. The story is so important that the brothers at the Episcopal monastery on Memorial Drive and in monastic communities around the world have been praying a version of it almost every day for centuries. Grounding themselves in its wonder, the local monks by the river pray this passage 363 days a year, all except Good Friday and Holy Saturday, chanting a short prayer, similar to the Ave Maria, called the Angelus:

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.

Similarly, the wonder of our story has inspired countless painters and artist to make it one of the most frequent subjects of Christian art, dating back to the 4th century! And, it's been an equally frequent subject of great theological controversy through the centuries. And much of it comes down to how we hear and imagine the story!

Artists and theologians, mostly men, have variously depicted Mary as young and timid in the face of the angel. It's only after she passively surrenders and submits her will to Gabriel's call that she finds her voice and sings of her soul magnifying the Lord! Others, including feminist liberation theologians, have insisted that Mary is wiser than her years, remarkably self-possessed, a partner and willing participant who prayerfully offers her consent to bearing the Christ child! This religious, historic and sociological impact of this particular fault line in interpretation cannot be underestimated! Meanwhile, almost all the renderings by Western artists, at least, depict a white angel and a white Mary, including the one in our stained-glass window right up there, in the center lancet of the North Transept. Suffice it to say, this is part of how patriarchy and white supremacy remains so entrenched in the church writ large. If we continue to venerate white angels, white Mary, and with them white Jesus, we will continue to equate whiteness with the epitome of both divinity and humanity. Its bad history and its bad theology! In addition, most Annunciation paintings depict a winged Gabriel either just off the ground or standing several feet apart from young Mary, which itself carries a message that requires a re-reading. Most that is, except this powerful image behind me which gives us cause to wonder anew! Thanks to Andrea Seek and Laurie Williams and to conversations we've been having on Deacons, we have permission to reprint this representation by Janet McKenzie and to use it as part of our Advent worship and spiritual practices.

Mary Haddad, who has written about this portrayal, helpfully point out that that oft-depicted physical distance between the angel and the girl is a “paradoxical metaphor for the overarching role of women in the telling of our story about God coming near and dwelling among us. On the one hand, she explains, “there is the unwitting importance and centrality of Mary... the God-bearer, whose consent was a pretty big deal in making this story happen. On the other hand, there is the unconscionable marginalization of women by the institutional church, the oldest boys' club of them all. They put Mary on a pedestal and made her a perpetual virgin; in other words, perpetually untouchable, safely out of reach, and cut off from positions of power and leadership in the world that God so loves.... To this pseudo-veneration, one imagines Mary saying, "Don't adore me; ordain me." Amen! ¹

Yet we can see how McKenzie's Annunciation offers a powerful corrective to this patriarchal distancing, let alone to the culturally disembodied, white-washing of our story. Haddad illuminates that in McKenzie's portraits, “There's a profound intimacy of the meeting. The angel Gabriel's wings enclose and embrace Mary.” Look close and you can see it! Mary on your left, Gabriel on the right with a gaze of steady, expectant care, as if waiting for and not assuming her response. Again, from Haddad: “There is no distance between them: they're touching! ...Here, the mother of God is not a little lower than the angels or anyone else for that matter, and what good news this is for all mothers, for all women, for the marginalized everywhere. Here, the heaven-sent angel is grounded squarely on earth; heaven and earth are both grounded in the love of God.” Haddad adds: “Mary stands on her own, poised to think deeply and independently about deep things and to make decisions on her own. Her downward gaze is a look inward. She has an inner life. She matters. She stands her ground, and yet she is not alone. Hail, Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you.”

Maybe it is this sense of intimacy and companionship with the angels that allows her the courage to discern her deepest purpose which is to bear God's light for the world! Talk about a wonder! What a model she is for us in this regard, to keep our ears and waking visions open to the annunciations of the angels in our midst, those who would prompt us to look inward, to find our grounding, to understand deeply the ways that we are all called to be bearers of Christ in body and soul, and to give our consent to participating in the ongoing birth of God's incarnate love in and for our world!

One more quote from Haddad: She writes “Sadly, the church has been so slow to let this story about the light of the world, borne by the unlikely Middle Eastern Mary, illuminate it enough to transcend categories of race, gender, and class. The stained-glass ceiling has been so slow to crack and really let the light in. Until now....

¹ Haddad, Mary E. *Holiness and the Feminine Spirit: The Art of Janet McKenzie*. Edited by Susan Perry, Maryknoll, NY, Orbis Books, 2009

[Still] something within her — call it faith, call it trust, call it risk, call it her ticket out of Galilee — something within her said, "Go for broke." In a world where young girls like her had no say in anything, Mary now had all the say in the world."

Thank you, Janet McKenzie, and thanks to all who continue to imagine and reimagine this great story! I love the idea of stained-glass ceiling cracking for that's exactly what is happening in the story, in a way! With the Angel Gabriel leading the charge, God breaks through the very firmament and with it our all too human constructs of what is and isn't possible, especially for women, for persons of color and all who are marginalized!

First, she hears the angel saying that she is favored, and that God will be born in her! Can we wonder together and imagine an angel coming so near to us, wrapping a wing around our shoulders, holding us close, reminding us that, Covid or not, we are not alone? What would that greeting be for each of us? Might it be an assurance that we too are full of grace, that God is with us, whatever our race or gender may be!

Next, her initial response! "How can this be?" Before we even get to what follows, who among us can't relate! She doesn't question that something deeply transformative is happening to her. How often do we find ourselves with the same question! Whether its good new or bad, we say it all the time. Come on! No way! How can this be? How can it be this good? How can it be this bad! 2020! How can this be? It's that response that slows the roll to judge things as all good or all bad, that response of utter astonishment. Can we stay in this space of perplexity and wonder? Can we hold onto the paradoxical instinct both to surrender ourselves to God and at the same time to actively join a revolutionary resistance with God, resisting the world as it is and being co-creators of the world as it should be, as God created it to be!

Next, the text tells us that The Spirit of the most high will overshadow her! To me this is the one of the most remarkable and instructive lines in this passage! How often we do let ourselves be overshadowed? There's one to be ponder in our hearts! And this is not by some domineering presence! This is by the power of the Most High God! An overshadowing love that teaches us to decenter ourselves, to humble ourselves, to ask not how we can be served but to ask how we can serve and serve with joy and gladness!

And finally, her profound statement of consent! When we find ourselves in times of trouble, can we let Mother Mary come to us, and speak to us these words of wisdom: Can we say, and sing Let it be! Let it be with me according to your word!

Friends, the angels are drawing near even now, they are hovering around! We need not wait for the birth itself!

For now, it may be enough simply losing ourselves in the wonder and words of this extraordinary and ordinary first century Palestinian Jewish woman who grew up poor in a no-name town called Nazareth!

In closing, imagine my surprise when I opened my inbox this very morning and found a UCC devotional written by a UCC colleague Tony Robinson, on this very theme of wonder! He writes: “St. Gregory of Nyssa once commented, “Concepts create idols; only wonder comprehends anything. People kill one another over idols. Wonder makes us fall to our knees.” [So] take a break today – maybe for the entire Advent season – from concepts and lists, from judgments and bickering. Only wonder. Fall to your knees at the wonder of it all.”

Waiting and watching, yes, and wonder, too! The wonder of Mary! The wonder of it all. Thanks be to God. Amen!



