

## ANNUNCIATIONS

*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*

The annunciation story has been one of the most popular subjects of art by some of the world's greatest painters. Some of my own favorites include works by Botticelli, Leonardo da Vinci, and a contemporary work by the Russian painter Geli Korzhov. Another one I return to often is called the Merode Altarpiece painted around 1425 by Robert Campin. Since 1957, this triptych has resided in the Cloisters, which is part of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

There are many things to admire in this painting—the sharp detail, the crisp color, all the technique and visual poetry of the best of northern Renaissance painting. But if you were observing this painting in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, when it was just completed, there is something striking and innovative that would have been the first thing to catch your eye. Up till then, artists depicting this biblical scene would usually suggest either a historical setting in Nazareth, or they set it in a portico as if in a convent or some other ecclesiastical setting, like this fresco by Fra Angelico from the Convent of San Marco, in Florence. But in the Merode Altarpiece, the setting is a middle-class sitting room, with contemporary furnishings and the accoutrements of everyday, domestic life in the Netherlands around the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Some have suggested that the painting depicts the real home of the donors, the wealthy merchant and his wife, who commissioned this work.

Many of the objects in the painting, the candlestick and lily and such, are placed there for symbolic reasons, but all of the furnishings would have been familiar to any family who lived in a similar townhouse. And the way the artist treats these objects, the care with which he depicts light and shadow, all convey a sense of the real, the tangible. In the decades before this painting, most art, and especially religious art, was set in an aristocratic, courtly, or sometimes mythical world. This annunciation happens not in some mythical time and not in some place far removed from the everyday life of the artist and his audience, but in the real world; and it is happening in real time and in a recognizable place, among the familiar items of everyday life.

Does it still happen that way? Do annunciations still come to us in this way?

I know that the story we read in Luke is unique, it is a singular announcement that sets up the birth of Jesus. But thinking about this story and especially the way it is re-told in art like the

Merode Altarpiece sets me to wondering about how annunciations still come to us; how God still breaks into our everyday world and ordinary lives.

Of course, this sort of thing seems to happen all the time in the biblical narratives. Abraham and Sarah are camped out by the oaks of Mamre when three angels appeared to them to tell them about another miraculous birth. And angels and visions were common among the prophets such as Ezekiel and Elijah; it was one of the many ways God communicated with ancient Israel.

But does it still happen that way? How do you think you would respond if out of the blue, just when you are minding your own business, standing by the sink washing dishes or pecking away at the keyboard writing a sermon, a stranger suddenly appears and starts speaking to you? And says that God has chosen you to bear Christ into this world. Well, you would be frightened half out of your skin. That's probably why the first thing that the biblical angels usually say is "Fear not," and you can understand why. It's a frightening thing to think about.

Do annunciations still come to us? Well maybe they do, but they may not come through an angel like we know from Renaissance art or Christmas cards.

I think of the stories Jonathan Kozol tells in his books about places like Mott's Haven in the South Bronx, the poorest congressional district in America. In gathering materials for books about the inequalities in education and health care, he takes time, years, to get to know the children of some of the most neglected schools in the country. And he tells the most deeply moving stories of what these children teach him about courage and resilience, about grace and compassion and neighborliness. He writes about how these children—many of whom have seen death in their families, through AIDS or gun violence, many of whom see their father only when they visit him in prison—how these children speak freely and easily about deeply religious things, like how "God's heart" is at work, pumping love into the world. He feels privileged to be invited into the mysteries they reveal to him. And he says, "one of the most perfect ones is when a child, for no reason you can think of, feels the impulse to unlock a secret from her soul. Sometimes it happens when we're sitting at a table in the afterschool, sometimes when we're walking in the garden of the church, [and] sometimes in a whispered message through the heated tunnel of the child's hands placed right beside my ear." (*Ordinary Resurrections*, p. 75)

Or sometimes, annunciations may come from someone close to you and familiar. That's what a young man in a story by Truman Capote discovers as he remembers the most important person in his life. She was called a "cousin," but she was already in her sixties when the young man was just a boy of seven. They both lived in a house that included other relatives, but they always felt like outsiders and so they were allies. Every year in late fall they would gather and shell pecans from a neighbor's grove, and then pool their collective pennies and nickels to purchase enough ingredients to make some 30 fruitcakes, which they gave as presents to local friends or sent off to people they had never met—a missionary couple in Borneo and even President Roosevelt.

And each year, they dream of grand presents they would like to give to each other, but a combination of poverty and generosity necessitates that they give each other the same gift, a handmade kite. And so, in this memory of their last Christmas together, he recalls them going out on a bright morning to a hidden clearing and laying in the grass as their kites soar in the sky. And out of the blue, she tells him: "You know what I've always thought? I've always thought a body would have to be sick and dying before they saw the Lord. And I imagined that when He came it would be like looking at the Baptist window: pretty as colored glass with the sun pouring through, such a shine you don't know it's getting dark. And it's been a comfort: to think of that shine taking away all the spooky feeling. But I'll wager it never happens. I'll wager at the very end a body

realizes the Lord has already shown Himself. That things as they are”—her hand circles in a gesture that gathers clouds and kites and grass and [their dog] Queenie pawing the earth over her bone—“just what they’ve always seen, was seeing Him.” (“A Christmas Memory,” Modern Library Ed., pp. 26-27)

So, yes, maybe annunciations do still come to us.

And it may even be that annunciation doesn’t come from an angel or any person at all. Maybe it comes like a breeze through a window that opens up to the world outside, to things as they are, what we’ve always seen.

Maybe it comes when you get caught up in something outside of yourself, something that you did not initiate or think up or plan, something larger than your own life, something that draws you out of yourself. Someone or something else intrudes into your life while you are minding your own business and suddenly you discover that your business is not your own anymore. This is one of the greatest gifts we are given in life, not success or wealth or power; not something we have wished for ourselves. The greatest gift is to find that place where our little lives get caught up in a greater life—the life of others and of the world.

And when this gift comes to us, all it asks is that we are receptive to it; when this window opens up, all it requires is for us to say yes to the world outside. Mary says yes not because she fully understands what she is getting herself into, and not because she has calculated how she might benefit from this offer. She says yes out of trust that with God all things are possible. Which, more than anything else, means that God has a way of making things work out even when we can’t see how.

I’ll bet we’ve all known people who are prone to saying yes to just about anything that presents itself. Many of you will remember Lois McIntyre. There is hardly any service organization or helping opportunity in Mason City that doesn’t have Lois’s fingerprints on it. She was instrumental in starting and organizing and supporting such agencies as Hawkeye Harvest Food Bank, and Charlie Brown Day Care Center, which not only provides childcare for working parents, but gives children a good start in the development. She helped start the organization that has evolved from Handicap Village to One Vision. She had her hand in other projects that are still being carried out by agencies like Community Action. It seems that whenever an opportunity arose to serve or help others, Lois said yes. And even if that opportunity did not present itself to her, she said yes anyway and got others to say yes as well.

When you say yes to the world and to what God is up to in the world, you may discover something inside yourself that you did not realize was there—some gift or ability, or some willingness to do things that take you outside yourself, beyond what you thought you were capable of doing, or willing to attempt. It is not always something we seek out or think up for ourselves. It is something that God gives—and it grows inside of all of us and we bring it to birth and nourish it, and maybe in the process we begin to discover that we too are bearers of Christ in the world. And so, in a way, we too are virgins who give birth.

That is the other side of this annunciation coin. Not only do we listen for God’s messengers who appear in disguise; sometimes we are called to be that messenger ourselves. What if you are the one through whom God is speaking?

Annunciation, the announcement that God was coming into the world in person, came to an unmarried young lady in a small village in a backwater province of the Roman Empire. Annunciation comes to us, whoever we are, wherever we may be. And when we say yes, it opens us up to the same purpose. To let something from outside ourselves and beyond our small sphere of existence become implanted and grow within us, and within our communities. It is a call to give birth to a gift.

So, in this Advent and Christmas season may we start being more aware of the messengers of God's word and God's love that appear all around us if we have the eyes to see and ears to hear, and if we have open hearts to receive them. And may we start being more aware of how we bear Christ into the world, how God's love comes into the world through us.

But be careful. That message that we hear or the message that we are called to bring may not be what we expect. It may be a message about how the world is about to change.

Here the rest of the story, the song of Mary that has come to be called the Magnificat:

And Mary said,

*"My soul magnifies the Lord,*

*and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,*

*for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.*

*Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;*

*for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.*

*His mercy is for those who fear him*

*from generation to generation.*

*He has shown strength with his arm;*

*he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.*

*He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;*

*he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.*

*He has helped his servant Israel,*

*in remembrance of his mercy,*

*according to the promise he made to our ancestors,*

*to Abraham and to his descendants forever."*

*Luke 1:46-55*