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December 4, 2022
Luke 1:26-38

From Generation to Generation: God Meets Us in Our Fear

Prayer of Illumination. Holy God, whether it's through angels or music, friendships or sermons, study or nature— when you speak, we long to hear it. In a world as chaotic and broken as ours, we could use your words of hope and healing. With gratitude we pray, amen.

Last week heard the stories of the ancestors who preceded Jesus – the foundations of our faith. The genealogy from the first chapter of Matthew ended with “...and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.” From generation to generation. This morning we pick up with Mary's story – a story that is told every Christmas season. Let us listen to these words from the Gospel of Luke with fresh ears, seeking to weave this story into our very lives. Hear now these words from Luke chapter 1 of the birth of Jesus foretold:

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 the angel 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. **This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

According to an article in *Christianity Today* by Kate Shellnutt, the most searched, read, and bookmarked verse on the YouVersion Bible app in 2020 was Isaiah 41:10: “So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.”¹ In 2021, the most popular verse was Matthew 6:33: “But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be

¹ <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2020/december/most-popular-verse-youversion-app-bible-gateway-fear-covid.html>

added to you."² These two verses pretty well sum up where we find Mary on this Second Sunday of Advent – being told not to fear, for God is with her. And seeking the kingdom of God and God’s righteousness through her acceptance of the gift from the Holy Spirit.

In church lingo, our scripture passage this morning is known as The Annunciation – a fancy way of saying The Announcement. And it is an announcement of epic proportions. The angel Gabriel – sent by God – comes to Nazareth in Galilee to deliver a message to Mary on behalf of God. Although this is the Big Announcement – the capital “A” Annunciation, it is not the first announcement that the angel Gabriel makes in the Gospel of Luke. Gabriel has already visited Zechariah, a priest serving the Temple in Jerusalem. Gabriel tells Zechariah that his wife Elizabeth, although well advanced in years, has become pregnant and will bear a son – a son who will make a way for the Lord – a son we know as John the Baptist. Gabriel has been busy!

Earlier in our service, as we continued our journey to Bethlehem, we placed angels in our nativity tableau. Angels are important part of the story of the nativity. Since many of us do not have much personal experience with angels, much of our understanding of angels – in particular their role in the Christmas story - comes from art. According to Wikipedia, which references *The Oxford Companion to Christian Art and Architecture*, The Annunciation is one of the most frequent subjects of Christian art. Depictions of the Annunciation go back to early Christianity, with the Priscilla catacomb in Rome including the oldest known fresco of The Annunciation, dating to the 4th century.³ This morning during our Adult Education hour, we will consider how the artistic portrayal of The Annunciation can lead us to a deeper understanding of Mary’s journey to bear the Christ child.

In New Testament scriptures, the Greek word translated as “angel” is “angelos.” And while our mind immediately goes to a figure dressed in a white robe with a glowing halo, at its heart the word means “messenger” or “the one sent.” The one sent, in this case, by God. The angel Gabriel comes on behalf of God. This message is God’s initiative. And it is within that frame that we seek to understand this scripture’s impact on our very own lives.

The angel Gabriel is sent to deliver a radical message from God – that Mary would bear son and he will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. Now just the angel showing up to Mary is enough to engender a range of emotions - concern – confusion - apprehension – fear, as the angel acknowledges. How would we respond if an angel appeared to us with such a message – with any message? How does Mary respond? Mary doesn’t argue with the angel. Nor does she deny any fear. Instead Mary acknowledges the ambiguity of the situation, and in her perplexity responds with a question, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?”

² <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/youversion-reveals-2021-verse-of-the-year-and-bible-app-trends-301434951.html>

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Annunciation_in_Christian_art

Today, December 4, is the birthday of the poet Rainer Maria Rilke. Rilke was born in Prague in 1875. The *Theological Almanac* shares, “that while living alone in Castle Duino, an old medieval fortress, he heard — as he later put it — the voice of an angel speaking to him about life, death, and beauty. He wrote two long poems that night in a single sitting, and a decade later finished the cycle of ten long poems he dubbed the *Duino Elegies*, exploring the differences between angels and human beings, the meaning of life and death, and his conviction that the core human calling is to experience the beauty of ordinary things.”⁴ Rilke spent much of life and writing and exploring these themes. His writing included many letters, some of which were collected in the book *Letters to a Young Poet* – letters he wrote to the writer Franz Kappus. In one letter he explores what it means to sit with questions for which there are no obvious answers. You can see this quote in the words of preparation in our bulletin. Rilke says,

“Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.”⁵

Rilke’s words seem quite appropriate for Mary. “Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them.” And while the angel gives Mary an explanation that the Holy Spirit will come upon her, it is his next utterance that helps her follow Rilke’s advice to “live the questions now.” The angel says, “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.”

Mary may not have known the depth of what the angel was saying and all that lay ahead. But I suspect that she grasped the uncertainty of her own future - the fear of abandonment. The fear that no one would understand her, no one would believe this incredible story of an angel who told her that she was a favored one? How many of us –during the long dark days of the pandemic, during times of grief or during other difficult times have we had the fear of being cast aside and forgotten, abandoned and isolated? Mary asked a question. How can this be? And God met her in her question and God met her in her fear.

Asking questions does not mean that one does not have faith. Others question what the angels say and ask for signs to prove it. Think about Zechariah who is rendered mute when he asks for a sign as to how he can know that his wife Elizabeth will bear a son. And the angel says to Zechariah, “But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.”

⁴ <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2022/11/29/theologians-almanac-for-week-of-december-4-2022>

⁵ *ibid*

Mary does not ask for a sign. She accepts the angel's explanation, even though it comes at great risk to her. She displays a faith in the promises of God, the God who meets her in her fear.

This is not a faith born of naivete. Rather it is a faith born of trust. In the latest issue of the magazine *Christian Century*, Samuel Wells, the vicar of St. Martin-in-the-Fields Church in London, writes about the two kinds of faith we can have⁶. He says that “the first is the desire to attain a level of certainty, conviction, and passion that somehow carries us over the chasm of doubt, distress, and despair.” This type of belief is fundamentally “...a form of escape. It's a magic carpet that lifts you out of the ordinariness and jeopardy of your life and transports you to a realm of miracle, mystery, and cosmic purpose.” His paradigm makes me think about the belief systems that support religious and political radicalization of every type.

Wells contrasts this type of faith with a faith centered in trust. He says, “Trust doesn't assume life is about overcoming limitations. It's about finding truth, beauty, and friendship in the midst of those limitations. Trust doesn't think that if you wave a magic wand, things will change overnight. It finds companionship among the community of the waiting. Trust doesn't pretend that if you hold tight to the right things, nothing will ever go wrong. It inhabits the exercises and patience required to rebuild after matters have been strained or broken. Trust doesn't use people as a means of getting things but places all its energies in making relationships that transcend adverse and depleting circumstances. Trust, rather than belief, is the better part of faith.”

The better part of faith. The angel Gabriel says, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God”. The prophet Isaiah speaks for the Lord saying, “Do not fear, for I am with you.” In the stories we hear during this season fear is transformed to resolve, it is transformed to joy, and to praise. Over the next few weeks we will hear how God meets Joseph, Elizabeth, the magi, and the shepherds in their fear and how they live into the questions of their faith and how they in turn do not let fear stop them from fulfilling the work of the Lord. As we celebrate the birth of Jesus, the recognition of Immanuel – God with us – **is** our comfort and our promise. We will celebrate this promise of God with us in a few minutes at the communion table. A place where we can bring our questions and our fears. Because God always meets us and is with us in our fears. And our fears, like death, never get the last word. Join me in prayer.

⁶ Samuel Wells. The Better Part of Faith. It's Possible to Stop Believing, but We Can't Live Without Trust. *Christian Century*. November 18, 2022. Published on line at <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/voices/better-part-faith>