

Fourth Sunday of Advent – Year B - December 21, 2014
2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26; Romans 16:25-27; Luke 1:26-38
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

In today's reading from the Gospel of Luke, Mary receives a visit from an angel. This event is what the Church calls the Annunciation, and it's quite an announcement! Over the centuries, artists have attempted to portray the moment when Mary became aware that she was going to have a very special baby. You've seen some of these paintings: Mary sits calmly and regally, and often looks so composed that it is hard to remember she was just a girl (only in her early teens). She gazes at what the artists portray as a winged messenger, Gabriel, who bows in her presence. Gabriel is one of only two divine messengers – angels if you will – who are given a name in the Hebrew Bible. The name Gabriel means “man of God.” Whether he is more man than angelic being, or the other way around, gets a little blurry in the accounts in Daniel, and then in this gospel of Luke. Anyway, in these paintings, the bowing angel usually holds a lily, or in some paintings, an olive branch, or a royal scepter or staff, signifying respectively the purity, the peace, and the authority the messenger brings from God. Mary and the angel bend toward each other and look at one another at an intersection between time and eternity, heaven and earth, humanity and God. Somewhere up higher in these paintings you can usually see a dove, symbolizing that what's happening is under the guidance of the Holy Spirit; but at the center, everything focuses on Mary. The angel kneels in front of the young woman upon whose answer God and the whole creation depend.

Art and gospel story have been intermingled in our minds to express the inexpressible: because, of course, this whole event is almost inexpressible. It is so profound and majestic, so full of cosmic significance that we have to turn to a certain kind of story and art to share it among us. For mystery can only be expressed in the language of mystery.ⁱ

The first thing Mary hears from her angelic messenger is “Greetings favored one! The Lord is with you.” The story goes that Mary was confused and disturbed by these words and “pondered what sort of greeting this might be.” Messages that come at us or come from within us—and we all experience them—have to be pondered, evaluated. The more intense or demanding they are, the more essential it is to do this. Messages can come from many sources. They can be angelic and creative, or not from God, leading us in a wrong direction—even destructive—from a shadow source. We do well if we are troubled or concerned when something deeply directive wells up within us and we feel called to specific action. We are wise if we examine very carefully “what sort of greeting this might be.”

Such is Mary's concern that she feels fearful, perplexed, and inadequate. As with everything else we humans feel, fear has a legitimate role. It can clear our vision to see false notes in a possibility, to see traps, to realize that we are attracted to something that is essentially unwise or harmful. But, on the other hand, fear can keep us on the edge of possible action, and at worst it can immobilize. Mary's fear is also combined with confusion: “How can this be, since I am a virgin,” or as some translations read, “since I have no husband.” Young Mary's fear also had a root in her doubts about her own abilities

and limited life experience. Mary's question in essence asked, "why me, why ordinary me?"ⁱⁱ

Often we do not believe in our own abilities. Often we do not believe that others believe in us! It is significant that the message to Mary tells her that she is believed in, she is God's "favored one." That sense of being believed in by God, being trusted and accepted as one fitted for a particular task—even one as unbelievable and awesome as literally conceiving and giving birth to God—helps Mary cut through her feelings of fear, perplexity, and inadequacy. It provides the grace for Mary to say yes and live into her vocation. And besides, she is told, the Holy Spirit of God will help her accomplish this; and furthermore, her cousin Elizabeth is in a somewhat similar situation. To finally reassure her, Mary hears, "for nothing will be impossible with God."

Mary's call, her vocation, was immense—"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." While the vocation asked of Mary was immense (actually beyond human comprehension), what was true of Mary is to a degree true of our lives.ⁱⁱⁱ If we have a sense of being given a call, a vocation for a certain task, we may realize the task has been given because we possess the ability to carry it out, whether or not we really think so at the time. We have, in the language of the messenger, found "favor with God." That does not mean that we are morally or spiritually or physically superior in any way. It does mean that God has confidence that we, with God's grace, can carry out God's purpose. A lot of the time, more often than not, important things that happen in life seem to choose us more than our choosing them. Our best laid five-or ten-year plans are often interrupted by life's own plans for us: by sudden illness or surprise babies, by aging parents and by economic forces and other unforeseen events, or by new ideas growing in us. And in all this, if we ask God, God will give us the courage to live out our call.^{iv}

In reflecting on the Annunciation, we see that the messenger does not merely come to impose a task. Mary is not directed to obey. The message begins by stating a *possibility*. Only if Mary accepts her vocation can the possibility become actuality. That is true of each of our lives. God visits. God calls. God invites. God offers us life as vocation. That is enabled by the gift and response of faith. Faith is the ability to receive God and it is the open space in our mind, heart, and spirit (and in Mary's case, her womb too), in which God acts. Such faith is not some inert or passive thing—such faith has us energetically and actively will to have the will of God and no other done. That is exactly the meaning of the words which Mary spoke as she went from fear to perplexity, to expectancy and faith. As Frederick Buechner put it, "Angels are powerful spirits whom God sends into the world to wish us well. Since we don't expect to see them, we don't. [Yet] an angel spreads his glittering wings over us, and we say things like... 'I don't know where I ever found the courage'."^v Or, as Mary put it, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word;" and in that simple self-offering she defines all Christian vocation; and makes Christmas a reality.

Mary was the earthly anchor for God's Christmas purposes to become a reality. So also are we. "We are all meant to be the mothers of God," wrote Meister Eckhart, a medieval mystic and theologian. "What good is it to me," he continued, "if this eternal birth of the divine Son 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 Creator to give birth to the Son if I do not also give birth to him in my time and my culture? This then, is the fullness of time: [namely] when the Son of God is begotten in us."^{vi}

So, greetings, favored ones! The Lord is with each of you. Do not be afraid. For nothing will be impossible with God.

ⁱ Let's look a little more at the angel and Mary. First of all, in the original Greek of Luke's gospel, the word for angel can mean messenger or message. Always in the Bible, angels are understood to be the messengers or messages of God. Yet, we might find it more helpful to reverse the statement and say that messages from God are our angels. With this understanding we realize that angels have visited each one of us, too. Sometimes the message is of encouragement, sometimes of warning. Its way of coming to us may be through any of the many means of communication in our culture. Phone calls, or e-mails, conversations, or periods of quiet reflection, in a dream, a passage in a book, a remark of someone very close to us or not so close—any number of these may be messages borne on great wings, as it were, irrespective of the everyday disguise through which they come to us. As the Letter to the Hebrews testifies, "some have entertained angels without knowing it" (13:2). As one interpreter writes,

"Whatever the nature of their 'overshadowing,' angels fatefully alter our lives. Within the fire of their love lies the latent power for igniting terrifying judgment. We can wrestle with the angels [as did Jacob, Genesis 32:22-32], lose or find ourselves in their cascading glory [as did Isaiah, Isaiah chapter 6], shudder at their prescient declarations [as did Zechariah (Luke 1:5-25), and Mary (Luke 1:26-38)]. Though not always benign and often portrayed as morally ambiguous, they are irresistible. Lucifer ('light-bearer') illuminates the paradoxical association between rebellion and the fall into consciousness. The angels in genesis 6:2 seduce human women and sire destructive giants, yet in the Book of Enoch they also teach humanity the secrets of horticulture, metallurgy, astrology and jewelry making. Angels may embody the potentially saving or the potentially annihilating...Angels are agents of...revelation, proclamation, aid and guidance. They approach us as emissary dreams, visions and meditative states, manifest as celestial voices [from outside or from within]...star, cloud or fire. Their [often portrayed] wings are tokens of access to supernal regions of knowledge and information [and direction] unavailable to ourselves except in the bedazzling angelic moment...[In the Quran] the [same] angel Gabriel commands the illiterate Muhammad to 'Read!' and thus to assume a preeminent role as Allah's messenger. In near-death experiences, angelic 'beings of light' have lovingly encompassed the dying, returning them to life. The profound nature of angelic encounter is one of numinous insight or immediate, portentous intimation of possibilities consciousness scarcely comprehends. Angels trumpet us to [spiritual] and creative awakening; herald sacred birth and psychic unfolding."ⁱ

Having said this, we don't know what actual form Mary's angel really took. We do not know what voice brought to Mary the realization of what God was calling her to. We only know that she heard the voice, wrestled with it, as it were, had a transaction with it by using her own voice, and then accepted it; and therefore her future and the future of all humanity became utterly changed.

ⁱⁱ As Barbara Taylor points out, probably a few other questions flashed through her mind as well, like, "whose idea was this?" or "what's going to happen? I really don't understand how this can happen?" and "What will Joseph say? Will he stick around? Will my parents have a fit? Will my family stand by me or will I be kicked out of the house? With the pregnancy go all right? Will there be people to help me through it all?"

Will I survive his birth? Can I do this?" See Barbara Brown Taylor Gospel Medicine (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1995), pp. 151-152

ⁱⁱⁱ The reason we may have some trouble with the mystery of the full incarnation of God in Jesus is probably that we have not been able to recognize or admit the mystery of our own, albeit limited, incarnation. It is difficult to accept that the integration of God-with-us that was incarnated – enfleshed - and fully realized in Jesus can also be realized, in part, in us. Our selves on our somewhat insignificant journeys are very likely a microcosm of what God is doing everywhere and what God did perfectly in Jesus. If we are to believe the whole, we must start by trying to believe the part. If we are to love God's beginning and God's conclusion, then we must try to love God's process of Word become flesh in Jesus - and in ourselves. Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end—and much of the middle too—but we are beta, gamma, delta, and so on. It is all one. And we have been made one by God's yes to flesh in Christ.

^{iv} As Barbara Taylor again points out, "terrible things happen and wonderful things happen, but seldom do we know ahead of time exactly what will happen to us. Like Mary, our choices often boil down to yes or no: yes, I will live this life that is being held out to me, that is happening to me, or no, I will not; yes, I will explore this unexpected turn of events, or no, I will not. If you decide to say no, you simply drop your eyes [and shut your ears] and refuse to look up until you know the angel has left the room and you are alone again. Then you...[can] go back to whatever it is that is most familiar to you and pretend [you heard nothing and] that nothing has happened. [And] if your life begins to change anyway, you have several options. You can be stoic [and try not to feel anything]. You can refuse to accept it. You can put all of your energy into ignoring it and insist in spite of all the evidence that it is not happening to you. And if that does not work, you can become angry, actively defending yourself against the unknown, [the change in your life,] and spend all of your time trying to get your life back the way it used to be. And then of course you can become bitter and resentful and despairing [-seeing yourself as a victim], and comparing yourself to everyone else whose lives are more agreeable than yours and lamenting your unhappy fate. If you succeed in this, your life may not be an easy one, but you can rest assured that no angels will trouble you ever again.

Or you can decide to say yes. You can decide to take part, [and rather than seeing yourself as a victim, instead become a full participant] in a [Purpose] you did not choose [but which chose you instead, and then do things you didn't think you knew how to do] for reasons you do not entirely understand. You can take part in a thrilling and dangerous scheme with no script and no guarantees. You can [choose to say yes and] agree to smuggle God into the world inside [yourself, as Mary did literally]. Deciding to say yes does not mean that you're not afraid [of course]. It just means that you are not willing to let your fear stop you, that you are not willing to let your fear keep you locked in your room. So you say yes [to the message], to the angel; you say, "Here am I...let it be with me according to your word," and [in] so saying, you become one [more who is willing to bear God into the world, and in that simple self-offering you make Christmas a reality; and fulfill your Christian vocation, your response to God's call]." Ibid., pp.152-153.

^v Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC (London: Collins, 1973), pp. 1-2.

^{vi} Quoted in Taylor, Ibid., p. 153. Also, "If in your heart you make a manger for his birth, then God will once again become a child on earth." —*Angelus Silesius*