



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, December 20, 2020
The Fourth Sunday of Advent

Solemn Eucharist

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Adam Spencer, *Associate for Pastoral Care*
on
Luke 1:26-38
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Messengers

“We know the scene: the room, variously furnished,
almost always a lectern, a book; always
the tall lily.

Arrived on solemn grandeur of great wings,
the angelic ambassador, standing or hovering,
whom she acknowledges, a guest.

But we are told of meek obedience. No one mentions
courage.

The engendering Spirit
did not enter her without consent.

God waited.

She was free
to accept or to refuse, choice
integral to humanness...

This was the moment no one speaks of,
when she could still refuse.

A breath unbreathed,

Spirit,
suspended,

Waiting.”

These lines from the poem “Annunciation” by Denise Levertov describing, of course, the scene from today’s Gospel reading from Luke’s Gospel of the angel Gabriel visiting Mary and announcing God’s plans for her. Plans which, as Levertov notes, Mary consents to.

“Here am I,” Mary says,” the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word.”

But there’s that moment which the poet describes, that moment before the “Here am I.” When, after the angel delivers his tidings, the Spirit waits for Mary’s response.

Back a few weeks ago, on the first Sunday of Advent, Mother Meredith Ward gave a lecture at the 10am Theology class on the Annunciation in art. It was really excellent and can be found on our website as a webcast. The Annunciation, Mother Ward tells us, is one of the most popular images in the entire history of Christian art. Returned to again and again by artists down the centuries. Thousands of images exist of this moment from Luke’s Gospel from the lush canvasses of the Renaissance, to devotional images painted on the plaster walls of monastic cells, to a thoroughly modern piece by none other than Andy Warhol.

“This is the moment when the Incarnation occurs,” Mother Ward said, “when the eternal enters the human world....There is no salvation without the Incarnation. And there is no Incarnation without Mary...This is the moment, of the spirit suspended and waiting, that artists through the centuries have tried to capture.”

All of what we’ll commemorate this week and in the weeks to come hinges upon this moment, this young, unmarried Palestinian girl and her response to the angel’s message.

I was struck by one of Mother Ward’s slides during her presentation which showed cut-outs of different paintings each depicting different facial expressions on Mary’s face as she responds to the angel. Mary’s various responses ranged from surprise and shock to prayerful contemplation to peaceful acceptance to shy reverence to awe-struck fear. It was interesting too to see where the artists chose to set the scene - in a garden, in a Gothic church, in Mary’s bedroom. Or how they chose to arrange and depict the two figures - Mary seated or standing, the angel bowing down before Mary or descending from on high. It was great also to hear the interpretations of all of these different artistic choices from the participants in the class. And all of this - the artistic decisions about setting and posture, the various expressions on Mary’s face, and the ways we receive and interpret the scene in these paintings and in hearing or reading the Gospel text - all of this speaks powerfully to me of why the Annunciation matters. Because the Spirit waits for us too. For our own reception and interpretation of the message. And our response to it.

I was moved, also, by one particular image of the Annunciation by Henry Ossawa Tanner. I urge you to look it up. In Tanner’s painting, the angel is depicted not as a winged being but as a pillar of light which Mary looks at from a seated position in her room. I can’t stop thinking about it after an experience I had last week.

The Greek word *angelos* in our New Testament is a translation of a Hebrew word meaning “messenger.” Angels are, above all else, spiritual messengers of God. Intermediaries between heaven and earth, the transcendent and the immanent, the eternal and the time-bound. And their work did not end with winged spirits visiting Biblical figures.

Messages still come to us from beyond us, I think, if we have eyes to see them and hearts to receive them. It is one of the great glories of the Protestant Reformation and of the Catholic Counter-Reformation: the idea that God communicates grace to us individually, that God speaks to each of

our hearts and enters into each of our lives in their specificity. God needs no intermediary priest or church to do this and we need no particular piety to receive these messages besides discerning awareness and an open heart. God shows up in our consciences, our daily interactions with others, and in our deepest contemplations and desires, through art and music and the natural world.

In her poem, Levertov asks:

“Aren’t there annunciations
of one sort or another
in most lives?

Oftenthose moments

when roads of light and storm
open from darkness in a man or woman,
are turned away from
in dread, in a wave of weakness, in despair
and with relief.

Ordinary lives continue.

God does not smite them.

But the gates close, the pathway vanishes.”

God doesn’t force us to acknowledge what’s wonderful or beautiful or challenging in the world, God doesn’t bend our wills to follow the call to be compassionate or kind, joyful or just. God loves us enough to let us choose whether we listen or notice or care, let alone respond.

One night last week, I was having a real rough go of it. As many of you know, I am less than a month away from moving back to Illinois to begin my tenure as rector of Saint Elisabeth’s Church. And that night I wasn’t feeling up to the task. I was feeling overwhelmed by the logistics of this move. Anxious about the idea of becoming a rector for the first time. Fearful that I’m not up to it, that I’ll screw it all up. And carrying all of that stress and worry like a bag of bricks on my shoulders, caught in the fog of my dark thoughts and fears, I was turning off the lights in my living room to go to bed turning them off one by one until all that was left were the strands of electric lights on our Christmas tree. Those little bulbs softly lighting up the dark walls of the room. Rose had hung the lights earlier in the day but we hadn’t done the ornaments yet. And there in front of the tree, for some reason, I paused. Nothing miraculous happened then, nothing dramatic or supernatural. I didn’t hear the voice of God booming in my mind. I didn’t have the archangel Gabriel suddenly standing in my living room. Just the beauty of glowing light in darkness, the slight scent of evergreen in my nose. But I paused. And then I began to cry and to smile. I can’t quite explain it to you -what happened in me then - except to wager that perhaps God, in that moment, made use of the simple beauty of those lights and of that tree to communicate grace to me. Pure, unearned gift. Goodness and beauty, serenity and peace. And a sense, utterly mysterious yet viscerally real, of a love both beyond and within me. I could have brushed it all off as sleepy sentimentality, unplugged the tree, and gone to bed to dwell in the dark some more on all of my worries and my fears. But instead I sat there on the couch, for a long while, just looking with gratitude at that simple, beautiful tree, that pillar of light, that messenger of God.

As that great Christmas carol “O Little Town of Bethlehem” says, in the words of Episcopal bishop Phillips Brooks:

“How silently, how silently,

the wondrous gift is given;
so God imparts to human hearts
the blessings of his heaven.
No ear may hear his coming,
but in this world of sin,
where meek souls will receive him, still
the dear Christ enters in.

O holy Child of Bethlehem,
descend to us, we pray;
cast out our sin, and enter in,
be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels
the great glad tidings tell;
o come to us, abide with us,
our Lord Emmanuel!"

May we, perhaps, respond as Mary did to the messengers of grace, grand and humble, in all our lives
- in this holy season and every day.

"This was the moment no one speaks of,
when she could still refuse.
A breath unbreathed,
 Spirit,
 suspended,
 Waiting."