

Advent 4B Sermon

December 24, 2017

Luke 1:26-38

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.

Countless artists down through the centuries have painted the scene described in today's Gospel – what the Church calls “The Annunciation of the Angel Gabriel to Mary,” or simply “The Annunciation.” In some of those paintings, the angel Gabriel is suspended in the air above Mary, looking down at her; in others, the angel is kneeling beneath Mary, looking up at her; in some more recent paintings, the angel appears as simply a bright column of light. In many paintings, a white dove is hovering over Mary.

Now, all of these artistic depictions of the Annunciation can be helpful, for we humans like to see things with our eyes. “Seeing is believing,” the saying goes. And yet, none of those great painters of the Annunciation believed that they were painting the scene as it actually would have looked had they been there. After all, in most of these paintings, Mary is dressed in the clothing of the artist's own day and native land, and the rooms and buildings in the paintings reflect the architectural style of the artist's day. In doing this, those artists were trying to bring the *meaning* of the event into their own day and time. They had no delusion that they could paint an historically accurate scene; nor did they want to!

Helen Keller once wrote, “The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched - they must be felt with the heart.” 12th- Century monk Richard of St. Victor wrote that we humans have been given 3 eyes: the eye of the flesh, the eye of the mind (reason), and the eye of the soul (contemplation). Most of the time, we think of “seeing” in terms of seeing with the eye of the flesh: our physical eyes. But when blind Helen Keller spoke of “seeing” her garden,

and “seeing” New York City from the top of the Empire State Building, she was not talking about seeing the appearance of things with her *physical* eyes (which could not see); rather, she was speaking of seeing the essence of things with the eye of her soul. Ms. Keller believed that the grass she “saw” was greener and the sky she “saw” was bluer than any grass or sky that you and I see.

From the time I was a young boy, I thanked God each December that I wore eyeglasses. I felt sorry for my friends with perfect eyesight who would never see a Christmas tree the way I saw it with my glasses off: a myriad of colored starbursts touching or overlapping each other – even twinkling! To this day, I love looking at a Christmas tree without my glasses on! Taking away the sharpness of my physical vision opens me up to see reality a bit differently; opens me up to see more with the eye of the soul.

My friends, I firmly believe that *this* is the way we are called to see Christmas. For the Biblical accounts of Christmas are not *histories*; they are *stories*. And the purpose of stories is to get us beyond and beneath historical facts and data. For historical **facts** do not move us, do not transform us; *stories do*.

So, let’s view today’s Gospel story, for a moment, not with the eye of the flesh *nor* with the eye of the mind, but rather with the eye of the soul.

The 5th-Century Saint Augustine was seeing with the eye of his soul when he wrote: “Mary... *first* conceived Jesus in her **heart**, *before* she conceived him in her womb... The Virgin Mary did not have intercourse and conceive, rather she *believed* and conceived...” Medieval mystic Meister Eckhart put it this way: “If Mary had not first given *spiritual* birth to God, God would never have been born *bodily* from her.” The focus, for both of these Christian writers, is **not** on the *physical* virginity of Mary. The focus, rather, is on what some have called the “*virginity of the soul*.”

And what is “virginity of the soul”? Fr. John Shea (*Starlight: Beholding the Christmas Miracle All Year Long, New York, Crossroad, 1996, pp. 97-127*) suggests that its principal characteristic is a deep inner longing – a yearning, “a desire to be intimate with the ultimate source of life.” In its longing, soul-virginity is not passive; rather, it is “an *active* hunger, a waiting for One we cannot *make* arrive but whom we trust will appear.” “Let it be with me according to your word,” Mary says. She **desires** and **wills** that it be so. She does not say to the angel, “Well, if *you* say so...” She *wants* it to **be** so; something deep within her *longs* for it to be so. At some level of her being, she knows that intimacy with God is her life’s deepest desire.

And at some level of OUR being, **we** know that intimacy with God is *our* life’s deep desire, also. For, you see, Mary is our alter-ego; our twin; our model for saying “yes” to God in our own lives. A good spiritual exercise would be to read through this Gospel passage at home on your own, substituting your own name

wherever Mary's name occurs in the story. **You** are God's favored one, full of grace – that's the meaning of your baptism! **You** are the virgin soul in whom the Christ Child is conceived!

Which is not to say that you and I, like Mary, will not experience our moments of fear! Who among us isn't at least somewhat fearful of making oneself totally vulnerable to another – even to God? It is not simply that in making ourselves vulnerable we are letting go of *control*; we are also letting go the **loneliness** and separateness with which many of us have come to identify. Mary's consent is an act of courage. She *wills* that God take the initiative to manifest divine life within her – to give spiritual birth to Christ within her. And “God's love is always fruitful... To be in touch with the divine is to enter into [a]... life-giving process.” (*ibid.*)

When we close or blur the eyes of the flesh and of the mind and see through the eye of the soul, as I believe we are called to do at Christmas, virginity becomes a potential for *each* of us, regardless of any past history of physical intimacy. “Virginity as a *physical* fact either ‘is or isn't’;” writes Fr. Shea; “virginity as a *spiritual* condition is a possibility of each moment.” (*ibid.*) And so Mary's story becomes *our* story. 17th-Century German poet Angelus Silesius wrote,

What does it profit me if Gabriel hails the Virgin
Unless he brings to me the very selfsame tidings?

What does it profit you and me if Gabriel's message is *only* for the Virgin Mary, and not also for our **own** virgin souls, our own longing souls? We must not hear the story of the angel's Annunciation to Mary as something which happens *outside* of us. No. It is to **us** that Gabriel makes his announcement: “through the power of the Holy Spirit *you and I* will bring forth from *our* emptiness divine life.” We need only consent to God's Spirit and say, with Mary, “Let it be to me according to your word.”

AMEN