

## Advent 4B 2020 Sermon

December 20, 2020

*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; in others, he is kneeling beneath Mary; in some more recent paintings, he appears as simply a bright column of light. A dove, symbol of the Holy Spirit, is often present in paintings of the Annunciation.

Now, all of these artistic depictions of the Annunciation can be helpful, for we humans like to see things with our eyes. “A picture is worth a thousand words.” And yet, few of those great painters of the Annunciation believed that they were painting the scene as it actually would have appeared had they been there. On the contrary: in many of these paintings, Mary and Gabriel are both 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.” 12<sup>th</sup>-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 (for she could not); 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 have thanked God each December that I was nearsighted. I felt sorry for my childhood friends with perfect eyesight who would never see a Christmas tree the way I saw it with my glasses off: a myriad of colored star-bursts touching or overlapping each other – even twinkling! To this day, I love looking at a Christmas tree or outdoor Christmas lights without my glasses on! Taking away the sharpness, the detail of my *physical* vision opens me up to see reality a bit differently; opens me up to see more with the eye of my soul.

And my friends, I believe that *this* is the way we are called to see Christmas. For the Biblical accounts of Christmas are *stories*, not *histories*. 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*, for so often they provide the meaning and Reality *behind* the facts.

So, let’s take a tip from those painters who painted Mary and Gabriel with the clothes of the painter’s own day, in the *setting* of the painter’s own day; and let **us** try to bring this Gospel story into our own day and time. Let us put ourselves in the place of Mary.

“Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you!” the angel says. And then we are told that Mary “was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.”

Note that she is **not** perplexed by the *presence* of the angel, but by the angel’s *greeting*, the angel’s *words*. Gabriel had called her “favored one.” Who? *Her*? God’s favored one? It doesn’t compute. No wonder she “ponders what sort of greeting” this is! She is a simple “nobody” in a small village in a remote region of the Roman Empire. But the angel says it again: “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found **favor** with God.” He doesn’t say *why*; doesn’t list all the good deeds she has done in her life to *deserve* such favor. She is simply favored by God.

What if the angel Gabriel were to appear and say that *to you*, or to me, “Greetings, **favored** one”? Not just “Greetings, *one among 7.8 billion people* on the face of the earth.” No. God’s favored one. Not that God is going to call you or me to give **physical** birth to Jesus; that was Mary’s unique calling. But I would suggest that if Gabriel were to bring a message to you or me about our **own**

unique calling, he would begin with the same words: “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” The question for us is, would we “ponder” that greeting, like Mary does? Ponder what it means for our life? Entertain the possibility that it would totally transform us? Or would we just say, “God’s favored one? Yeah, right,” and not take it seriously, not believe it, not take it into our hearts, take it into our lives? 17<sup>th</sup>-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?” The selfsame tidings: “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.”

“The Lord is with you.” It is the same thing that God had told Abraham, Jacob, and Moses: “I AM with you.” And note that Gabriel does not say, “The Lord **will** be with you;” but “The Lord **is** with you.” Present tense. It is not a prophecy, but a statement of fact. God cannot come to us in the future; God can only come to us in the here and **now**.

But as British priest has written, “It is always possible to draw back from the presence of God. [God] will never overwhelm.”<sup>1</sup> It is always possible to draw back from the presence of God. God will never overwhelm. Drawing back is an option for Mary; as well as for you and me.

And if you are like me, drawing back from the presence of God in the here and now is what we do much, if not most, of the time. For more often than not, we don’t *live* in the here and now; we live in the future. Thoughts racing through our minds about what we will do or say next, or tomorrow, or a week from now. Holding our breaths until we can get a vaccine, and things can “go back to normal” (whatever that means!). Impatient as we stand in line or sit in our cars at a red light, our minds focused on that time 30 seconds from now, when the light will turn green and we can get on toward where we’re going. We don’t sit in our car at that red light and say, “What a beautiful day it is!” or give thanks to God that we *have* a car to sit and drive in. Because we aren’t present to the present moment. And if God only comes to us in the present moment, then that means we are not present to God, even though “The Lord is with [us].” It is always possible to draw back from the presence of God. [God] will never overwhelm.

And **this**, I think, is where Mary behaves in a way that **is** different from *our normal* mode of behavior. For she is **present** to the angel, present to the greeting he delivers, ponders it in the **present** moment. Asks a question. And then, rather than withdrawing from the presence of God, as you and I so very often do, saying, in effect, “No,” Mary *opens* herself completely to the angel’s message. She trusts the angel’s words, that she **has** found favor with God (as we saw earlier when we recited Mary’s Song)<sup>2</sup>. She trusts that the Lord is **indeed** *with* her, in that very present moment; and she opens herself to that Divine Presence, that Divine Word, that Divine will *for* her and *in* her. She surrenders in total vulnerability, and says, “Yes.”

Now, I doubt that an angel of God will appear to us in the physical form we see portrayed in so many paintings of the Annunciation. Maybe Gabriel actually looked more like the angel Clarence in that Christmas Film, *It's a Wonderful Life*. Or maybe Gabriel came to Mary in a dream, in the same manner that angels appeared to her husband Joseph. More likely, I believe, the message of God will come to us in such a manner that we don't see the messenger at all; or if we do see, it will be in the same manner that Helen Keller saw the green grass and the blue sky. But see or not see, make no mistake: this Gospel story of the Annunciation is about you, and it is about me. And it tells us what God is eternally saying in our hearts: "My favored one, I am with you, always and everywhere; here and now."

AMEN

1 The Rev. Canon Jessica Martin, Ely Cathedral, "The Lord is With You," *The Living Church*, October 29, 2020

[https://livingchurch.org/2020/10/29/the-lord-is-with-you/?utm\\_source=The+Living+Church+Email+Updates&utm\\_campaign=aef378bd3a-EMAIL\\_CAMPAIGN\\_TLW-20201207\\_COPY\\_01&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_0826f52b83-aef378bd3a-128470037](https://livingchurch.org/2020/10/29/the-lord-is-with-you/?utm_source=The+Living+Church+Email+Updates&utm_campaign=aef378bd3a-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_TLW-20201207_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_0826f52b83-aef378bd3a-128470037)

2 Luke 1:46-55