

Mary

Fourth in the Advent Annunciations Series

by

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Luke 1:26-38

²⁶In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary.

²⁸And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."

²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

³⁰The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He 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. ³³He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

³⁴Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?”

³⁵The 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.

³⁶And 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.

³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God.”

³⁸Then 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.

Over the course of these Advent Sundays we have seen how Mary's call, while unique, stands in a long line of annunciations. God has a history of sending messengers to break into the lives of isolated people, to announce good news, and to issue a call. God is in the business of revealing a more promising future and God enlists human partners to be bearers of hope and joyful expectation.

Early in Advent, we heard how Hannah's prayers were answered and she bore a child who would grow up to anoint ancient Israel's great King David. We saw the Temple swirl with the overflowing presence of God when Isaiah was called to be the prophet who would lead the people out of exile and into a season of more justice and abundance again. Last week Gabriel singled out Zechariah to bridge the promises of the Old Testament with the New as he prepared for the birth of John in holy silence. And today, Gabriel has winged his way over to Mary, and startled her with the news of an unplanned and unexpected baby on the way.

What is absolutely extraordinary about Mary is how ordinary she was. Just a girl, really, in the days when an overrated Roman emperor named Caesar ruled everything, and a political non-entity named Quirinius governed Syria. As scholar Richard Lischer has pointed out, "Jesus was born into *that* world, the same world that we inhabit – a world of misery, misrule, and unspeakable beauty, a planet on which we make and take out the garbage, do our laundry in the basement, and watch for meteors in the night." ¹

Into a world much like our own, Mary is called to bear a child, a baby destined for greatness, for every single one of us. Like Zechariah before her, Mary receives Gabriel's announcement with a bit of fear and with a question, "How can this be?" Theologian Cynthia Rigby notes: "In twelve verses, Mary is described as favored, perplexed,

¹ Richard Lischer, "Advent is a season of sighs, especially this years," *The Christian Century*, 11/24/20.

thoughtful and afraid. She questions, she believes and she submits to her vocation.”²

When I describe Mary as “ordinary,” it’s because I find Luke’s description of her as favored, perplexed, thoughtful and afraid – the same kind of adjectives I would describe where we have been in this unusual year. This multi-faceted pandemic year of tragic illness, of ongoing racial tensions exposed, and of political chaos, have found us afraid, forced to be thoughtful, certainly perplexed, and I hope we have also been aware of God’s favor and blessing. All of these feelings are wrapped up together in Mary and, through her, our ordinary lives receive an extraordinary announcement of God’s favor. As Denise Levertov asked in her poem entitled *Annunciation*: “Aren’t there annunciations of one sort or another in most lives?”

I am confident that there is no better visual interpretation of this scene than Henry Ossawa Tanner’s *The Annunciation* here in our Philadelphia Museum of Art. The son of an African Methodist Episcopal Minister, Tanner holds a unique place among American painters. Although a realist, he stands alone among that school of painting for his sacred art of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Considered one of the best students of leading American realist, Thomas Eakins at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, late 19th century America did not offer the best opportunity for an African-American. He journeyed to Paris in 1891 where he spent the rest of his life and where he painted *The Annunciation*.

² Cynthia Rigby, *Feasting on the Word*, BI, p.92.



The realist painters of the time would not dare create a vision of something supernatural as Tanner did. They prided themselves in depicting only what they could observe, as the leading French realist, Gustave Courbet, said, “I cannot paint an angel because I have never seen one.” Yet, Tanner, raised in the religious home of an American Methodist Episcopal family put having never seen an angel aside asking, “What would the Annunciation have *really* looked like?”

Instead of rendering Gabriel heavily laden with big wings, in Renaissance splendor and baroque fabric, like countless artists before him, Tanner portrays Mary as a teenaged Jewish girl, ethnically Middle Eastern, sitting on a ruffled bed in a room of fissured plaster, with no

possessions except a lamp of low burning flame and a few jugs. Gabriel, comes as a pillar of light, a supernatural illumination, spiritual energy perhaps? The shelf behind Gabriel forms a cross with the glow coming down, and the three pots on the shelf, behind her and at Gabriel's "feet" represent the Trinity, as he depicts the vessel of Mary herself who will come to bear the Child of God. Mary is just an ordinary Middle Eastern girl.

But, when you think about it, this surprising choice of God is not limited to Mary, but is actually a theme of the whole of Luke's story of the nativity. Because no one would have imagined that shepherds would have been the chosen audience of the angels, either... Matthew's account is no different. Why foreign kings and astrologers and not those people of ancient Israel already chosen and believing? Preacher David Lose says that, "Of course, once we've gone this far, we realize that this is the paradigm for most of the biblical story... all the way until you get to us... We are also the ordinary recipients of God's extraordinary favor. We too are a rather motley crew who don't have our lives together as we should, or even as we would like. We come to Christmas with a mix of hopes and fears, with moments of faith and an equal awareness of our failing."

We come with very little to boast about, if truth be told, and much to confess. This year – we come with enormous grief and sadness over lives lost, businesses closed, hunger rising, distance from those we love. "We come as those finally with no more right to expect God's attention, let alone God's favor, than Mary and the shepherds and all those who populate the Christmas story. We come into these dramatic annunciations as those who should not expect God's attention and yet, we hear in them that we are also those whom God has addressed, called, perplexed, honored and favored."³

³ David Lose, "Blessing Mary," 1/14/15, davidlose.net.

If we can identify with ordinary Mary, in that regard, we must also remember that she said, “yes.” And when she says, “*Here I am, a servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word,*” She is inviting us to echo her response. I am sure that all of us can think of ordinary people in our lives who have been bearers of God for us.⁴ People who showed up with love and compassion just when we needed it. People whose deep commitments as disciples have inspired us to serve and to be more selfless in sharing. Friends we can lean on, through whom it seems that God’s mercy and grace just shine. Groups of folks who companion our journey to combat injustice, racism, environmental degradation. Just ordinary people, like Mary, who have received a word from above and have become intent on bearing it for others.

We typically meet a lot of these good souls at church, and yet while we are apart from one another, I keep hearing stories about meals being delivered, huge service projects undertaken, a refugee in a much better place, new friends made over Zoom, poinsettias being delivered with a kind conversation held at a distance. I keep hearing about real sacrifices being made to help decrease the isolation and increase the love and joy and hope of another.

This is how God is revealed, through ordinary people like us, like Mary. We too are on the receiving end of God’s Annunciations. So may we also humbly accept the challenge and the call and echo Mary in the actions of our lives: “Here I am, a servant of the Lord.”

AMEN.

⁴ Idea of naming these examples paraphrased from Camille Cook, “Mary Receives a Promise” Georgetown Presbyterian Church, 1/5/20.