

The Church of the Pilgrimage  
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### Luke 1:26-45

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end." "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail." "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her. At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"

### **Openness Required**

In bible study this week, shortly after this lesson had been read out loud a woman took a deep breath and sighed. "This scripture has so many things in it I have problems with" she said. Angel messengers. The idea of the virgin birth. Maybe it is a great story that we've outgrown", she said.

And no, at that the walls of Amy Simpson's house where we meet did not fall down. And I am not aware of a single person who was there that day who got struck by lightning, the speaker of this honest response included!

But I want today to take issue with her, that woman, not on the scripture having some things that may be hard to grasp, no, for that is surely true but on the idea that the annunciation should be given such a status as stories we've outgrown. I personally find in it great beauty...and I hope in time, here today, we'll together find in it a good word for our day.

The night of the nativity display here in our church a woman connected to our church approached me saying she liked our nativities (the ones Mike and I had offered up) because they were so *modern*. "My very favorite" she said, "was the one you got in the Holy Land." Later, when the nativities came home to our house, and that particular one was placed on the mantle in the living room, I looked at it,

thinking of this woman, and why she would have liked this particular one so much. It was made of olive wood, and placed within an olive wood branch that was carved to look like a cave (which by the way is what some scholars believe Jesus was born in.)

I had remembered all that. What I had not remembered so much was the figures themselves. They were representational, that is to say that they were carved in such a way that there weren't really faces, just the suggestion of a head upon a body. There were clearly Mary and Joseph and shepherds and wise men. There was clearly a baby. But what made each figure unique was that there was a kind of crevice, or round openness to each figure, here, in the chest region. It was as if they were carved, all of them, to be carriers for God.

I suddenly was taken back to that shop in Bethlehem, remembering how we went back and forth between a more traditional nativity and this one. I had the traditional one in mind when we walked into the store. But this one spoke to us more.

Which leads me, then, to the power of this passage Steve just read. The power, for me, has to do not so much with the angel, or how baby Jesus got into Mary's womb -- I am willing to leave these things to the mystery category, things we humans cannot fully understand ...or even yes, permit myself to think of those parts as things that may not have happened just like that. The power comes in this great interaction between Gabriel and Mary, and the good news the story imparts -- Namely that over and against any tendency to place God far off, detached from the nitty gritty of human life, the story of the annunciation speaks to the nearness of God, the desire of God to be at one with us in Jesus come to earth and the way in which God is doing something new, something special in this child who is to come. Second, Mary reminds us that in our lives, particularly in our spiritual lives, openness is required.

It is common to think of Mary as the Mother of Jesus, the one who carried him and bore him, into this world. But our scripture today would have us pause to consider her openness. The way she had to listen to take in this strange thing the angel was telling her. The way on so many levels it did not make sense, did not go with what she knew to be true of life in general or her station in particular. The thoughts she must have had about the trouble this pregnancy would cause.

I spent some time this week looking at various art depictions of the Annunciation. There were wealthy looking Marys, standing in palace courtyards, or sitting on thrones, often looking quite dispassionate. There were poor looking Marys, and these tended to be younger Marys, eyes wide open holding onto earthen walls of humble abodes, or sitting on simple cots in humble abodes, and (in at least two instances I could find) looking quite afraid. Most of the Marys, however, looked demure, submissive: head bowed down, arms crossed across her chest in a gesture of humility. Sometimes the angel Gabriel was floating in the air above her, and sometimes Gabriel was leaning on one knee, beneath her, as if making a marriage proposal. So many ways of depicting this story!

And then I saw the portrayal you see on your bulletin cover today-- *The Annunciation* by Antonello da Messina of Sicily, in a painting dated to 1474. You can see right away it is quite different. For one, the focus is completely on Mary. Where other artists depicted the angel as being a winged person, or in some cases, a shaft of bright light, da Messina did not include the angel at all. We can only infer what is happening by Mary's attitude, the way she is turning slightly toward something, the way her hand is out in a gesture that seems to suggest a presence. As one commentator has noted, Mary shows "both fear and resistance ...and perhaps also consent to the request she has just received." (internet short article, "Italy") I like the combination: fear, resistance, and consent.

I'm going to be honest now. Mary, the submissive Mary of so many poems, songs, and portraits, is not someone I can particularly relate to. As well known Catholic novelist Mary Gordon has said, when she was a young girl "Mary was a stick to beat smart girls with." Young girls were taught to be like Mary. Know Your Place. Be submissive. Don't show your energy or imagination or will.

But I don't see this hiding, this passivity in this Mary at all. I see a woman who is young, but mature. I see a woman who is calm, but moved. I see a person of real flesh and blood, complex, the way we are all complex, trying to take in something that is at once overwhelming and life changing. You may notice she is reading, or she was reading before she was interrupted. The artist wants you to know she is a faithful person. The book was likely opened to Isaiah, where the coming together of God and people through a special person was so often foretold.

Mary, this Mary is one who knows something of the promises of God. Mary, this Mary, seems completely atune to the message she is hearing. This Mary might be one in keeping with the broader lens the Gospels give us: not only as receptive to God's will, but also as assertive and active in God's salvation history.

So when the angel leaves, you can imagine such a Mary, a real flesh and blood woman, saying to herself, wondering to herself who am I, who am I that this should be happening to me? So she runs to her kinswoman Elizabeth, who has also found herself in some unlikely circumstances—expecting a baby at a very old age. Elizabeth then herself uses language like that...wonder language: who am I that the mother of my Lord should come to me? The two women find comfort in each other. They help each other believe what they each have been told: that God is at work in their lives. They help remind each other that with God nothing is impossible.

So I don't know about you, but I do NOT want to dismiss this story as something quaint, "something for our dust" as that cute shop on Mainstreet has named itself. No, I want this story with its angel and its mystery and its strangeness and its contradictions to be very much alive...I want its impulse to live and move and have its being in us ....and I want us to see something of Mary in *ourselves*. I want this

story to speak to our now, and to our need to live in openness and wonder for what God might be doing in our world, and in our very lives, in these dark and complicated days in which we find ourselves. And I do not believe that belief in the virgin birth is essential to holding on to the power of this story, or even that it is essential to having faith. There is a difference between facts and meaning. God is *doing something special here*. No matter how Jesus got to be in Mary's womb, Mary is still asked to be a person of courage, asked to let God's purposes be fully at work in her life. And she says Yes.

For the last several weeks some of us have been reading "Anticipating Joy" the daily devotional booklet that was in-house, written by members and friends of our congregation. (If you haven't gotten one by the way, we have a few extras available after worship today) Four years or so ago when we put out our first one of these, it was fancier in packaging, in terms of having color photos and glossy paper. But in truth, in the weeks leading up to it, the people organizing it had a hard time finding 25 people in our congregation willing to write a reflection. Someone was quoted as saying it was sort of like pulling teeth. Now, four years later, Rose Wagner reported it wasn't hard at all. People may have felt daunted at first, but they were up for it, they took the risk and tried something perhaps for the first time. And the reflections themselves – they are so beautiful. So personal, so honest. And the message I hear in these reflections, as I have read and enjoyed them, is that yes, God *is* at work in our lives.

I want to share another observation from our congregational life. Every year we have this service, we call it a service of comfort and peace. Each year this service has been meaningful, a quiet place in the midst of an overly busy and sometimes overly cheery season, an honest place in which to acknowledge that we all do struggle. For years we've generally ended this quiet service with quiet. People could stay in the sanctuary a while, choose to talk with others, or not. But this year we ended it with the passing of the peace. I saw people turning to one another. Talking. Hugging. A few crying together. There was the sense of the comfort that comes in realizing that whatever you are going through, you are not alone. If you look to our tree today you see among all the white Moravian stars some plain brown cardboard stars, and these are from this past Wednesday night, and they have on them prayer concerns or names of those who are hurting, or names of those who are departed and sorely missed this Christmas season. These hang alongside the ribbons that we hung on the tree some years ago to acknowledge Sandy Hook, and the tragedy that took place six years ago. It is a tree, then, that acknowledges the difficult world, the difficult things – and the fact that Jesus came to be with us in all that too. Is your pastor just imagining this, but is our New England reserve and Yankee individualism being gently broken down here, as we learn to trust God and one another here in this place?

Meister Eckhart was a thirteenth century philosopher, mystic, and theologian. One of my favorite Meister Eckhart quotes is this: *What good is it to me that Mary gave birth to the son of God fourteen hundred years ago, and I do not also give birth to*

*the Son of God in my time and in my culture? We are all meant to be mothers of God. God is always needing to be born.*

As we come to the end of this year we can certainly think of things that need to be born in us. Greater hopefulness. Greater compassion for our fellow human beings. Greater care for our environment, God's good creation and more opportunities for service to others in our Plymouth community and in our wider world. Can we imagine ourselves as mothers of God helping to bring such things to birth? Maybe there are things that need to be born in our congregation...or are being born now, even as we speak, things we are helping to bring forth even as Mary brought forth Jesus.

Is this not what it is to be a person of faith: To make space in our lives, in our spirits, for the workings of God?

Does the old story not still breathe life in us?  
Amen.