

December 24, 2017 – Fourth Sunday in Advent
“Suspended Between Fear and Hope”
Rev. Dr. Scott Landis
Luke 1:26-38

You may want to pull out your smart phones and Google “The Annunciation” to get a visual on this story just read from the gospel of Luke. Or you may wish to peer at the icon here on the pulpit (if you are close enough) to see Fra Angelica’s depiction of the angel Gabriel’s visit to Mary. Or better still, let your imagination run wild on what that incredible moment might have been like.

Artists have struggled with this brief yet critically important story as this unbelievable news was given to Mary – news with which she had to decide what to do. Typically depicted as a beautiful young woman with lovely clothes and perfectly manicured fingernails, she is either reading from a prayer book or spinning thread for God only knows what. She looks so composed it is hard to remember she is just a girl – in her early teens – not her twenties. When an angel appears to her, he is often seen holding a lily, an olive branch, or a royal scepter – signs of purity, peace, or the authority he brings from God.

Into that lovely scene – the scene that artists have fixated upon for years – the scene about which countless musical scores have been written – that scene upon which we project all kinds of sentimental hopes and dreams – the angel lowers the boom. “Mary, you may wish to sit down for this one.”

I’m not trying to be funny, to cheapen or rob the story of its endearing and enduring charm, but I do want us to peel back the layers just a bit and become more fully aware of just what is going on at this critical juncture in Mary’s life – and how it impacts our own.

Years ago, in seminary I took a course entitled the “Psychodynamics of the Gospels” taught by our professor of pastoral psychology. It was a wildly popular course that many waitlisted to get in. The reason for its appeal was certainly due, in part, to the charismatic demeanor of the professor – but more so the course taught us to think critically about the gospel stories in order to glean a fuller understanding of what was happening in the psyche of the people involved – and how we might learn from that – and apply what we learned to our own lives. In some cases, this was a rather difficult task – but in the case of this story the psychodynamics are so obvious – we just tend to gloss over them in order to preserve the painting – our fantasy of the text.

But listen closely to what is written:

1. The angel Gabriel appears and addresses Mary, “Greetings, favored one. God is with you.

2. Mary is stunned – well, the text really says, “She was perplexed by his words and wondered what sort of greeting this might be.” But let’s face it, Mary must have been scared to death. Have you ever been visited by an angel?
3. We know she is frightened because of Gabriel’s next words, “Do not be afraid, Mary.”
4. Then he tells her she is pregnant – but the plot thickens, not only is she pregnant, but she will bear the Son of God – which causes even greater consternation.
5. Her response, “How can this be?” Her defense, “Since I am a virgin.”
6. Gabriel goes on at length trying to help her understand but ultimately states, “Nothing is impossible with God.”
7. To which Mary ultimately concedes, “Let it be as you have said.” After which Gabriel departs.

Okay, so that’s the story in the bible. We don’t know whether it really happened – or whether it took place in this manner. We certainly don’t know the length of time given this conversation. But let’s surmise that it really did happen just as written. And let’s follow the story psychodynamically – or at a feeling level regarding the scene as best we can.

We know that Mary is initially surprised – perplexed – or as I suggested, scared to death. She is perplexed with fear.

After the initial shock from the information given, she questions – “How can this be?”

Finally, there is the resolve, “Let it be,” an act of surrender as a sense of possibility is restored.

In other words, she moves from fear to hope through a time of reflection or questioning. Given some time to think about what was happening, she was able to accept the news and thereby move to a new level of understanding.

When you think about it, that’s the way life happens for most of us. It rarely goes as planned. In fact, most of our life is lived exactly like this. We are presented with some unexpected news:

You have cancer

I want a divorce

You are being promoted

You’ve won the lottery (okay I’m getting ridiculous – but I think you get the picture)

We are shocked – and often begin by questioning, “How can this be?” or “Why me?” It’s our means of processing what we cannot initially grasp or understand as we try to get our heads around a new reality. Like Mary, we may question God, or the universe, or others we think can help as we try to make sense out of our changing existence.

It’s right *there* – in that season of questioning – it’s there in that sweet spot where we draw close to God – it’s there that our real growth takes place. For extroverts it may involve lively conversations, engaging others or shaking our fist at God as we wonder aloud, “Why?” Introverts will likely move toward journaling, hand wringing, or confiding in a close friend or two. Both ways are perfect for the individual involved. And both are the means we engage Holy Presence as we gradually, in our own time, move toward acceptance, possibility, and hope.

Mary was suspended between fear and hope and the angel tried to reassure her with an abiding truth we all need to remember in times like these – “With God all things are possible.” We have to believe that in times like these. And when we do, we allow ourselves to participate in the holy enterprise of bearing God in our world today. When we are suspended between fear and hope and allow ourselves to question God we just might begin to realize anew the Emmanuel – the “God with us.”

Several years ago, Barbara Brown Taylor wrote a lovely meditation on this text which she entitled, “Mothers of God.” Among many of the same points that I am making, she also noted that Mary was never asked whether she would LIKE to be the mother of God; he simply *told* her. The angel did not ask her how that sounded to her and whether she would like to try out for the role; rather he told her – the Lord is with you.¹

I repeat, psychodynamically, that’s much more in keeping with reality. We rarely get to choose how our life turns out as it twists and turns. Oh, we can make plans. We can dream dreams and we might even conquer many obstacles, but it’s the interruptions – the surprises – even the bitter disappointments, and tragedies – it’s in those moments – when we are suspended between fear and hope that life really happens. It’s there – after long periods of questioning, and wondering, and prayer – that we begin to realize with God all things are possible. And when that becomes our reality – we, too, become God-bearers, or to use Taylor’s phrase “Mothers of God” in our world today.

“We are all meant to be mothers of God,” wrote Meister Eckhart, a medieval mystic and theologian. “What good is it to me,” he continued, “if this eternal birth of the divine Son takes place unceasingly but does not take place within myself? And, what good is it to me if Mary is full of grace if I am not also full of grace? What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth to his Son if I do not also do not give birth to him in my culture? This, then, is the fullness of time: When the Son of God is begotten in us.”²

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Gospel Medicine*, p. 154.

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *Gospel Medicine*, p. 156.

I often wondered what Mary really thought in that infamous moment when her entire world changed. There, suspended between fear and hope. What were her thoughts? What were hopes? What did she know to be true?

These are questions that might be helpful for us to ask as well. As the season of Advent draws to a close, the deeper questions as we live our lives suspended between fear and hope are before us as well. Can we see Emmanuel? Will we give our lives to him?

In lieu of our silence, I'd like to close with a beautiful song that tries to capture the perplexity of Mary's heart. Maybe it will speak to you as well.

Amen