

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

I have noticed from some of the online chatter that happens among ELCA pastors on social media that not everyone is having a church service this morning, which honestly boggles my mind. But even among those who are, some are focusing on Christmas this morning instead of the final Sunday of Advent. And that is really too bad for them, because they are missing a chance to focus on this remarkable gospel reading that we have before us this morning, the annunciation of the angel to Mary. For some reason, we only get this text once every three years in our Sunday morning readings during Advent. I think it's a text we should be reading every year, especially in the last week of Advent as we prepare to celebrate the mystery of our Lord's incarnation and birth in the Christmas season. If you have any interest in the visual arts, you may know that the annunciation has been one of the most popular themes among artists going all the way back into the Middle Ages. And no wonder. It's such an evocative story, isn't it? If you know this story, you have probably wondered at some point in your life about what it must have felt like for Mary, this teenage girl, suddenly to be face to face with an angel and hearing this news that would change her life forever. And in this way the story is not altogether different from other stories in the Bible, like the calling of Abraham, or Moses' encounter with God in the burning bush. But both Abraham and Moses were already in the midst of life-changing circumstances when they were called. Maybe a better comparison would be Jeremiah, who was very young when God called him, and who even pushed back a little against the call like Mary does here, ever so gently. More about that pushback in a minute.

But I wonder if you have ever thought about what it would be like to be Gabriel in this story. I can't say that I have, until this past week, when one of my colleagues in the weekly text study I attend directed my attention to something that Fredrick Buechner wrote some years ago. Buechner was a Presbyterian pastor and theologian who wrote some of the Advent and Lenten devotions we make available each year. He imagines Gabriel standing before Mary, thinking she was barely old enough to have a child, and telling her not to be afraid. And then Buechner writes this from inside Gabriel's thoughts: "As he said it, he only hoped she wouldn't notice that beneath the great, golden wings he himself was trembling with fear to think that the whole future of creation hung now on the answer of a girl."¹

It's certainly a modern concern that Mary would have had some meaningful say in what would happen to her here, because the overwhelming reality for girls and women in the ancient world was that such decisions were completely under the power of fathers and husbands. But it turns out to be not an exclusively modern concern in this case, because Luke gives Mary a word of consent: "Let it be." "Let it be with me according to your word." And this has been noticed by theologians down through the ages, including the likes of Augustine, Aquinas, and Luther. So Buechner stands in a long tradition of meditating on the possibility that Mary might have said no.

Imagine, then, Gabriel the archangel being nervous about Mary's response, hoping, like a young man proposing to his beloved, that she would say yes. And then let's remember that this is not Gabriel's first rodeo, as they say, not in fact his first annunciation. Earlier in this same chapter of Luke's gospel, right at the beginning, he appears to a priest named Zechariah as he is serving in the temple, to tell him that his prayer has been answered, that he and his wife Elizabeth will finally have a child after many years of not being able to. But things don't go so well with this first

¹ <https://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2016/9/24/gabriel>, accessed December 22, 2023, 21:35 CST.

annunciation. Zechariah is an old man and Elizabeth is well past her childbearing years, and so Zechariah does not believe the message. And because he does not believe, Gabriel tells him, he will be unable to speak until the child is born.

This is the baggage that Gabriel is carrying into the encounter with Mary. He's 0 for 1 in having his message believed. So yeah, if angels are at all like people, maybe he's a little nervous about how it will go this time. And what do you know, the first words out of Mary's mouth are almost the same as Zechariah's. "How can this be?" Now what? Did his heart sink at her incredulous response? Was this another swing and a miss? Did she, too, now have to be sentenced to nine months of muteness? But that's not where this story goes, as you know, and I have long wondered about the difference between these two annunciation stories. Both Zechariah and Mary react to the angel's news in almost exactly the same way, and yet Zechariah is punished and Mary is not. What gives?

I think there are at least two significant differences between Zechariah and Mary that we can glean from Luke's account here. The first is that Zechariah has been praying for Elizabeth to conceive a child for many years. Both he and his wife have wanted children for the longest time. Now it is happening, and he does not believe it. Mary, on the other hand, has not had this as part of her plan. Her plan, or at least her expectation, was that she would marry Joseph and have kids with him. That marriage has not happened yet, so this message of the angel comes completely out of the blue for her. It's not surprising that she was having trouble getting her head around this news. The second difference is that Zechariah is a somebody, and Mary is a nobody. Zechariah is a special person, a priest in the temple. His business, to put it crudely, was prayer. He of all people, you would think, should be receptive to answered prayer. But he is not. Mary is not a special person. By her own account, in her song that we have as our canticle in place of the psalm this morning, she is a person of humble station. She is one of the lowly. And that is what this is about. In Mary, God is making something out of nothing once again. This is new creation. The mighty are cast down, the lowly are lifted up. God is the one who is at work here, and our worldly notions of status and importance get turned on their head. Mary gets the second chance that Zechariah doesn't get, and so becomes God's willing partner in God's mission to save the world by joining us in our lowliness and reversing our fortunes through the death and resurrection of Jesus. And Zechariah? Well, he endures his nine months of silence and then at the birth of his son John he too is able to rejoice and become a proclaimer of God's goodness to him and his people. He is brought low to be lifted up again.

What does all of this have to do with us? Martin Luther thought that we have in this story of the annunciation, in the person of Mary, an example of faith that can encourage us in our own lives of faith. The medieval church had been holding up Mary as an example of purity, perfection, and sinlessness that put her almost on par with God. Luther thought that this was a mistake. If you pay attention to what she says about herself, Luther insisted, you would see something even more marvelous and useful. She was an ordinary person like you and me, a sinner even (dare I say it?) Yet God chose her to be a means of God's grace, an instrument God would use to bless and reclaim the world. Following the lead of Augustine, Luther wrote that it was indeed a miracle that God became a human being in her womb. But it was an even greater miracle that Mary came to believe Gabriel's promise and said yes to God's plan. God performs that same greater miracle in us as well, Luther insisted, when in word and sacrament the Holy Spirit creates faith in us to trust the promises of our baptism, the promises that we are forgiven our sin, freed from the power of death, liberated from evil, adopted into the household of God, and sent out like Gabriel to announce that good news to the whole world. May that miracle indeed be ours, and may our hearts respond to this glorious good news with Mary's words: "Let it be with me according to your word." Amen.