

Pastor Lara Bhasin
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
The Fourth Sunday of Advent, December 24, 2023
Luke 1:26-38

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We have come to the final Sunday of this year's very short Advent season. After this service, we will change the paraments and prepare for Christmas Eve. But today's Gospel is the most glorious Advent text of all, so let's not be in too much of a hurry to get to Christmas!

Today's Gospel text is the Annunciation! After the Passion story, it is the second most popular subject of Christian art, and is it any wonder? The artist who seeks to paint the angel Gabriel's surprise visit to the young Mary faces a challenge, but it is the kind of challenge that artists relish! How to capture the remarkable scene? A poor ordinary Jewish girl in a poor, ordinary, Middle Eastern village who is greeted, out of the blue, by an angel of the Lord. Angel visits are always depicted as terrifying in the Scriptures, and here we have this young girl who is addressed like royalty by this angel and confronted with the extraordinary news that she will have a baby who is the Son of God. She must have been trembling from head to foot.

Why is it a challenge to paint, though? Especially for contemporary artists? The subject matter of this story is miraculous. It depicts an event that is far outside the ordinary – God breaking into everyday life and revealing Himself and putting His mark on history. It involves the supernatural – it's an angel, and he talks! We really have no idea what angels actually look like, because they are from another realm after all. So the artist who sets out to depict this scene has to figure out how to portray a great and mysterious spiritual event that happened in the physical world. Should he or she show Gabriel as a man with wings? As a burst of light? It is fun to use holy imagination to try to guess how this scene might have looked to the outside observer. It is a challenge to try to capture the transcendental with paints and brushes.

But with each passing decade, the artist faces a public that is less and less receptive to divine transcendence.

Let's face it. We in the west especially tend to be a skeptical lot. We pride ourselves on being rational, scientifically minded people who demand naturalistic explanations for the mysteries of life.

Even people of faith cannot help swimming in the cultural water. We might enjoy these biblical stories, but consciously or unconsciously, we think of ourselves as belonging to a different time.

Even some of our most famous theologians have fallen into this trap.

Some of you may know the name Rudolf Bultmann. Bultmann was a 20th century German Lutheran theologian who wrote a lot of interesting and insightful things about the New Testament, but there is one thing I have never been able to forgive him for. In his most famous article, *New Testament and Mythology*, he wrote that (quote) “we cannot use electric lights and radios and, in the event of illness avail ourselves of modern and clinical means and at the same time believe in the spirit and wonder world of the New Testament.”¹

Nonsense! Stuff and nonsense!

Blessed Mary, Mother of our Lord, is the ultimate model of Christian faith. Better than Abraham, better than Paul, a better example for us to imitate than anyone except Jesus Himself.

Mary’s yes to the Lord, what has often been called the *fiat* (that’s Latin for “let it be done”) is the paradigm of Christian discipleship.

I want us to learn from Mary, to take her as our guide, but if we are going to do that, there is one thing we will have to give up. Not every Christian is guilty of Rudolf Bultmann’s prejudice, of course, but for those of us who have also been tempted to think that there is unbridgeable gulf between us and the people in the Bible, the people who lived and walked with Jesus in the flesh, then this is what we have to reject. We have to reject the assumption, which we may even be holding subconsciously, that people 2,000 years ago were superstitious, credulous, or simple-minded. That they were more gullible. That they were not like us.

There are critics of Christianity who say that the problem with religious people is their blind obedience to authority. They don’t think for themselves! An angel appears and tells them something, a voice comes from Heaven, they read something in the Bible, and they just believe it, no questions asked. This is the twisted picture that some unbelievers have of faith.

But they have it all wrong! The story of the Annunciation and Mary’s yes – her consent - to God is not a story of naïveté but of deep, whole-hearted,

¹ Bultmann, Rudolf (1984). *New Testament and Mythology and Other Writings*, translated by Schubert M. Ogden, Fortress Press: Philadelphia, page 4

reflective, and intelligent faith, the kind of faith that God wills all His children to have.

I wish I could show you some of these paintings of the Annunciation that I have been talking about. I'm too old-school to ever wish for a projector screen in our church sanctuary (don't worry, Pastor Greg!), but I would love to have a slideshow during a Bible study someday, because classic Christian art is a great way to deepen our understanding of the faith.

In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, it was common for painters to depict Biblical characters in contemporary clothes, often surrounded by many other anachronistic details. This is not because those painters were ignorant; perhaps they understood better than we do how the people of the Bible are just like the rest of humanity, and they wanted to drive that point home.

They also loved symbolism. Many Annunciation paintings, for instance, portray Gabriel presenting Mary with a lily as a symbol of her purity. But there is one common symbol in Annunciation paintings that I find particularly charming, even though it is as historically inaccurate as can be.

It is traditional for Mary to be portrayed as having been interrupted reading a book when Gabriel appears. Many, many paintings show her either with book in hand or a book laid out nearby. Of course, the codex, which is the book as we know it today, with pages that can be turned, wasn't invented until a couple of centuries after Jesus's birth. But even a scroll would have been unlikely. As our own dear Martin Luther loved to remind his congregation, Mary was a poor little maiden of Galilee who may even have been an orphan, was possibly illiterate, and realistically speaking was more likely doing her chores than sticking her nose in a book when the Annunciation happened.

But like I said, sometimes great art can uncover layers in the Biblical stories we might not even have thought of.

One of the reasons for the symbol of the book is that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law and Prophets. Gabriel's news should not have been a surprise to anyone who knew their Torah and their Jewish teachings. God had long been promising to send a Messiah who would be of the lineage of David. Many of those Renaissance artists, who really knew their biblical theology, painted the Book of Isaiah into the scene. Isaiah is one of the clearest prophecies about the Messiah and what He would be like.

Nowadays we have a popular Christmas song, and I happen to like it (so there!) called "Mary Did You Know?" It's the subject of a lot of funny memes

about mansplaining this time of year (and if you don't know what I'm talking about, remind me to add it to my slideshow), but in all seriousness, while the song is interesting and catchy, it would have puzzled the artists who painted Mary at the Annunciation with a book in her hand. Because what they are saying with that symbol of the book is that Mary did indeed know! She was steeped in the Scriptures, poor little Jewish girl though she was, and she knew about Eve and the exile from paradise to which Adam and Eve had doomed mankind. She knew that consolation of the desolate and release from captivity would come only when God sent His long-promised Savior into the world. The only real piece of news that Gabriel brings is that it is to be *her* Baby Boy who would be this Immanuel, this Son of the Most High, and that it would be *she* who was to be a second Eve even as her little Jesus was destined to become the second Adam who would reverse the curse wrought by the original.

The Annunciation is a revelation, but it is revelation that builds on previous revelations and historical events, and it fits logically into this framework. Mary was not being asked to believe anything crazy or irrational, and neither are you nor I.

Now let us look at how Mary responds to this angelic proclamation.

She is greatly troubled. Not by the idea in general but by the logistics of the situation. She isn't gullible; she's perfectly rational and she asks a rational, clarifying question. How will I have a baby if I have never known a man? And Gabriel, unperturbed at being questioned, explains that it will be the work of the Holy Spirit.

It's okay to ask questions! If you are a new believer, it's okay if everything about the Christian faith doesn't make sense right away, and you need more time to process. If you are a lifelong Christian, it's okay to bring your doubts and difficulties before the Lord. God is not afraid of being questioned. Although some of Christianity's detractors imagine Him as some kind of tyrant who demands blind obedience, this story proves otherwise.

This is what my great preaching hero, Tim Keller, of blessed memory, has to say about Mary's questioning. There is a kind of doubt that is the symptom of a closed mind, and there is the kind of doubt that is the symbol of an open mind. Mary has an open mind. She is interested in the truth and receptive to it when she hears it, to the point of being willing to relinquish sovereignty over her own life in service to that truth.²

² Keller, Tim (2016). *Hidden Christmas: The Surprising Truth Behind the Birth of Christ*. Penguin Books

I sometimes think it is we moderns, arrogant about our inventions and our scientific discoveries and blinded by other dubious “advancements” towards progress and enlightenment, who are the truly close-minded ones. Who are we to say that just because we have electric lights and modern medicines, we are better at discerning eternal truths than the people who came before us?

We are arrogant in another way as well. We are so enamored of our own autonomy and supposed intellectual superiority that we have trouble with the idea of self-surrender. We think of such submission as some kind of weakness or defeat but look at the richness and meaningfulness of the lives of those who have surrendered themselves fully to Christ. People like Mary.

Saint Bonaventure, in the 13th century, praised Mary for her active intelligence. (If you are under the impression, by the way, that the early and medieval church held women in low esteem, you ought to go back and read some of these church fathers.)

Active intelligence is an integral part of faith! God desires to relate to us not as mindless minions but as beloved friends! The Lord desires our love, our trust, and our surrender. Not our passivity. He means to make us not into clones but into better versions of ourselves, the people He created us to be. That is possible only by *our* yes to God. It is possible only if we echo Mary and declare, “Let it be to me according to Your word.”

And active intelligence means being open-minded, not close-minded. We must be open to the fact that there are more things in heaven and earth than we may have dreamt of, things like angels and prophets and an almighty and transcendent deity who, in the greatest and holiest mystery of all time, comes to us as a Baby born from the womb of a young Jewish girl who said yes to God.

Let’s get down to the nitty gritty. What should we take away from today’s Gospel text to implement into our own lives?

We should, like Mary, be steeped in the Word of God. If an angel should ever come to us with a surprise, let us too be caught with a book in our hands. The Bible!

The deeper our knowledge of the Scriptures, that great treasure of wisdom and revelation preserved for us through the centuries, the better we will understand how Jesus fits into our life today. We should be insatiably curious about the contents of the Bible. The more we know about what God said to

His people back then, the better we will understand what He is saying to us now. Regular hearing of the Word prepares our hearts to receive Jesus.

I dare say, it is the people who have already made up their mind that a so-called ancient book cannot possibly continue to speak truth who are the irrational and close-minded ones.

We should, like Mary, be open to holy mystery. Receptive to the Holy Spirit and ready to surrender to Him even when we do not yet fully understand. Most of the secular world suffers the curse of disenchantment. The average man or woman today who was raised outside the Church has trouble finding common ground with the people of the past who believed that miracles and other supernatural occurrences were a part of everyday life. Christians are lucky. We know that there are mysteries and wonders that may be beyond our current comprehension, but they are real because God is real and too great and holy for us to ever shrink Him down to fit our own limitations.

There is another way we should try to be like Mary. Of all the things I say today, this one might be the most shocking of all to modern ears, so brace yourselves. We should emulate Mary's purity. Mary's virginity and innocence are indispensable to her role as Mother of our Lord, but they are also important to her willingness to trust God and surrender to Him. She has been kept from the corrupting influences of the world, and this makes her better able to receive the Word.

God can work with the most broken vessels, of course, and Jesus's blood washes the most depraved sinners clean. But the more you can flee from sin, the more you seek to avoid falling in with the wrong crowd or filling your mind with the wrong images and ideas, the better off you will be. This is not limited to sexual purity, but it doesn't exclude it, either. Whether called to marriage or to celibacy, we ought to aspire to fidelity, innocence, and goodness at all times. And when we fail, we ought to seek, through repentance and confession, to be made clean again.

Finally, we should, like Mary, be willing to surrender. Surrender our will, our desires, even our lives. Mary readily gave up everything to say yes. She faced humiliation as an unwed mother, unimaginable sorrow as a mother who had to watch her own child die, and yet she never wavered. Because what she received in return was infinitely greater than what she relinquished.

This will be as true for us as it was for the Blessed Virgin. When we surrender our sins, we receive restoration and forgiveness. When we surrender our skepticism, we receive faith firm enough to hold us up through life. When we

surrender our will, we receive closeness with God. When we surrender our misguided and stubborn prejudices, we receive a glimpse of heaven. When we surrender our whole selves, we receive eternal life.

As we transition today from Advent to Christmas, from a season of somber reflection to a season of joy, I urge you to take a deeper look at the little maiden from Galilee. Her yes to God is our path to peace, love, and eternal life. And our best model for living in this world is her devotion to her Son, Jesus, to Whom belongs the glory, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Amen.