

Closing the Distance Between Us

Luke 1:26-38

Second Sunday of Advent/ 6th December 2020

Place yourself in her life. *Imagine* what it must have felt like to encounter a messenger of the Living God. Try to enter Mary's world. *Imagine* her astonishment and amazement, her surprise. She didn't ask for this encounter. She didn't go searching after it. It came toward her, came upon her.

Up until that moment she probably just wanted an ordinary life in small-town Nazareth. Living under the crushing oppression and brutal violence of the Roman Empire, probably just wanted to survive. Being around 13 or 14 years-old, she probably didn't imagine more for her life than safety, food, shelter, family, someone to provide for her, to love and appreciate her, someone like Joseph, someone to love in return, and children—children born into a world with a better future than hers, children of promise. Then all that changed when Gabriel came to town.

“Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” *You, Mary—favored one.* Me? Who? What? A child? Now? A savior? How? This was not the life she was hoping for, wishing for, but the life that was given to her, a life that would eventually pierce her heart (Luke 2:35). *This* life, this future was announced to her from out of nowhere. The annunciation came without warning—as they often do. It broke into her life, this word; it erupted deep within her ordinary existence and summoned her toward, propelled her into a different life, a different future. Did she have a choice? Could she have said no? We don't know. How long did it take for her to say yes? The text doesn't say. But what we do know from countless stories of the Bible—and this doesn't sit easily with us—is that our lives do not really belong to us. Yes, your life in some sense belongs uniquely to you, you have responsibility for it. But within the providence of God our lives are rarely the lives we plan or hope for and dream about. God often (usually?) has different ideas. It's been said that if you want to make God laugh tell God your plans. Sometimes the life we're given is not the one we expect. Sometimes the life we're given is not the one we expect—*by the grace of God.*

Mary's response to Gabriel here, as well as her entire life, is a lesson in how to be open to God's dream for us and the world. Mary shows us how to accept and welcome the God who desires to come close to us. All of this—the prophecies, Advent, the Advent candles, Mary, Joseph, shepherds, Magi, Herod, the Christmas story, the birth of Christ, God in the flesh, Incarnation, Immanuel, God with us, redemption, salvation—all of this points to the larger story, a larger narrative, the story of God's deep desire to come close to creation, to God's creatures, to humanity, to us. It's the story that the Church has tried to tell for nearly two thousand years. It's the story of God's desire to close whatever distance there might be between us—despite our strong resistance, despite the cost to God.¹ God draws near. God comes “down” and in and close, enters human life, becomes flesh, shares the air that we breathe, and gives us breath. Mary is the first witness to this story, the first to hear this story, the first person who placed her life in service to this story about to unfold through her life. We could say she was the first disciple. And we learn how to be a disciple by watching how she moves.

While it is true that Mary didn't ask for all of this, and we're not sure if she could have said no, it's striking that Mary was not completely passive either. She just didn't submit, grit her teeth, and be an obedient little girl. Mary doesn't reject the story outright, but neither does she immediately accept it. She's confused by the visit, "perplexed" the text says, which means something like "agitation," and "disturbed with alarm." She "ponders," more like reckons and wrestles with the meaning of Gabriel's greeting.



There are many artistic depictions of the annunciation, of Mary's encounter with Gabriel. There is a remarkable rendering by the Renaissance painter Simone Martini (1284-1344).² His *Annunciation*, completed in 1333, imagines Mary pulling away from Gabriel's message, questioning, doubting. She's almost protecting herself. She's not passive here. She has agency.

And then she pushes back. "How can this be?" she asks (Lk. 1:34). "The

Holy Spirit will come upon you," Gabriel says. But I'm not sure how assuring that was. What does that even mean? How can it make any sense without a frame of reference, something to compare it to, to help you receive it, understand it? How does one find a frame of meaning for something like this? She has nothing—except another outrageous, shocking story. For then she learns that her relative Elizabeth who was said to be barren, now in her old age, has been pregnant for six months. "For nothing will be impossible with God," Gabriel says (Lk 1:37). And it's then, and only then, that Mary, perhaps thinking, "Okay, I'm not alone in this," says: "*Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word*" (Lk. 1:38). And with that response Gabriel was on his way—probably relieved that she said yes.

"Let it be with me." "Let it be." We have much to learn by watching Mary. Not passively submitting, but actively welcoming, welcoming this news, this story, this child, this unknown future, stepping into a dark unknown. She's open to what is unfolding around her, within her, through her. Courageously allowing. Receiving. Surrendering. Trusting. Consents.

In her stunning poem "Annunciation," Denise Levertov (1923-1977) writes about Mary this way. Levertov imagines what's going on between the verses of the story. When we think of Mary, we "are told of meek obedience," Levertov says. "No one mentions courage." Here is a portion of the poem:

The engendering Spirit
did not enter her without consent.
God waited.

She was free
to accept or to refuse, choice

integral to humanness.

Called to a destiny more momentous
than any in all of Time,
she did not quail,
 only asked
a simple, 'How can this be?'
and gravely, courteously,
took to heart the angel's reply,
the astounding ministry she was offered:

to bear in her womb
Infinite weight and lightness; to carry
in hidden, finite inwardness,
nine months of Eternity; to contain
in slender vase of being,
the sum of power—
in narrow flesh,
the sum of light.

 Then bring to birth,
push out into air, a Man-child
needing, like any other,
milk and love—

but who was God.

This was the moment no one speaks of,
when she could still refuse.

A breath unbreathed,
 Spirit,
 suspended,
 waiting.

She did not cry, 'I cannot. I am not worthy,'
Nor, 'I have not the strength.'
She did not submit with gritted teeth,
 raging, coerced.

Bravest of all humans,
 consent illumined her.

The room filled with its light,
the lily glowed in it,

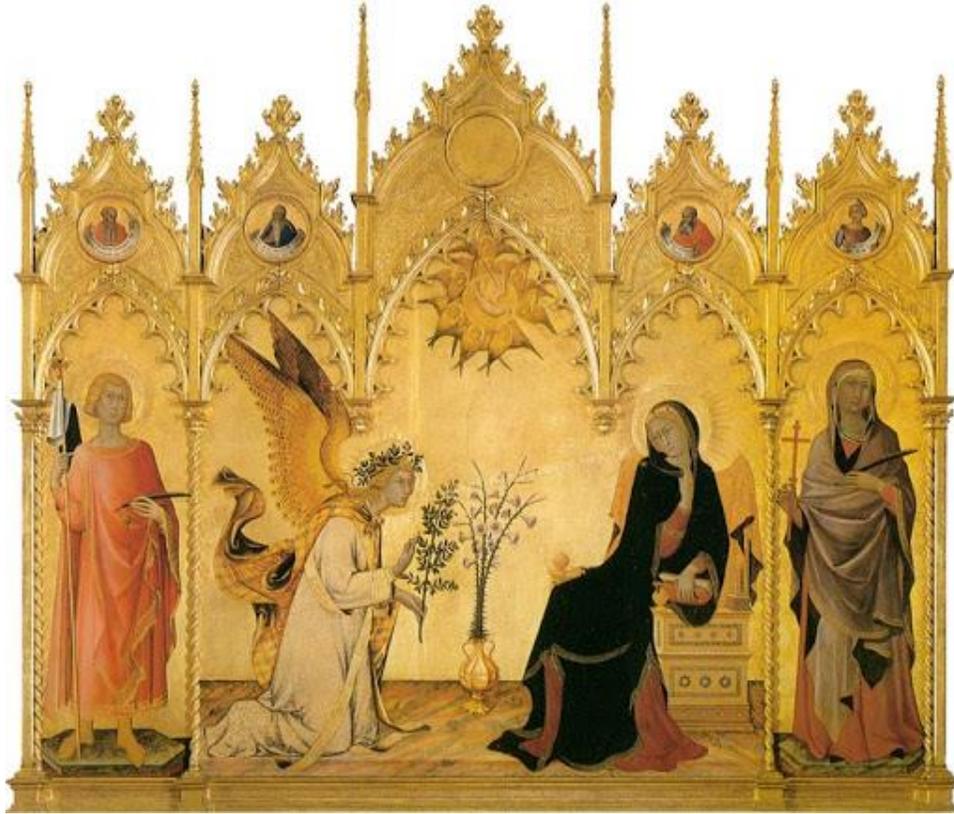
and the iridescent wings.
Consent,
courage unparalleled,
opened her utterly.³

Open. Mary shows us how to be disciples today, how to be faithful, how to be open and receptive to the God who still desires to be close to us through Christ. The medieval German philosopher, theologian, mystic Meister Eckhart (c.1260–c.1328) once made this provocative claim, “We are all meant to be mothers of God, for God is always needing to be born.”⁴ I love this. I think there’s a lot of truth in this. Whether woman or man, Mary is our model. We’re *all* meant to be mothers of God, giving birth through our lives to the very life of God that desires to come close. God is always *adventing* toward us, coming toward us, desiring to be born in us, to bring life and light and healing—salvation—into the world through us. *This* is why you’re here. *This* is why you exist. It’s why you’ve come into the world “for such a time as this” (Esther 4:14).

Like Mary, you and I are being summoned and called to fulfill the purpose of our lives in God’s plan to save and heal the world. She prepares us for the moment we hear these words spoken to us: “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.”

You.
The Lord is with *you*.
Mary shows us how to be courageous when God comes close, how to yield, surrender.
She teaches us how to be receptive, open, accepting, consenting, and helps us to say:

Here am I.
All of me:
here's my body,
here's my mind,
here's my spirit,
here's my soul,
here's my love and my heart.
All of me.
Here am I, the servant of the Lord.
Let it be with me according to your word.



¹ I'm grateful to my dear friend, the Rev. Christy J. Waltersdorff, pastor, York Center Church of the Brethren, Lombard, IL, for the sermon title and for lifting up this theme of God's desire to close the distance between us, taking on greater meaning during the pandemic, as we experience the stress, strain, and sadness of forced distance and separation.

² Martini's *Annunciation* may be seen today in the Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy. e

³ Denise Levertov, "Annunciation," *The Collected Works of Denise Levertov* (New Directions, 2013).

⁴ Meister Eckhart, *Expositio sancti Evangelii secundum Iohannem* cited in Bernard McGinn, *The Mystical Thoughts of Meister Eckhart: The Man from Whom God Hid Nothing* (New York: Herder & Herder, 2001), 116-117.