

Here Am I

In our gospel reading, this morning, we hear the story of the Annunciation—the visitation by the Angel Gabriel, who tells Mary that she will give birth to the Messiah. Luke’s is the only gospel that tells the story of the angel’s visit to Mary. In fact, we only have birth narratives in two of the four gospels. Mark’s gospel, the earliest written, begins with Jesus’ baptism. John’s gospel takes the origins of Christ back to the beginning of creation, where he already existed as the Logos, the creative Word of God. There is an angel visitation in Matthew’s birth narrative, but the angel comes to Joseph, and not to Mary, encouraging him to take Mary as his wife, even though she is already “with child from the Holy Spirit.”

Most modern biblical scholars regard the birth narratives as myths— charming inventions whose truth is probably more symbolic than literal. Some have speculated that there was something “off” about Jesus’ birth. Perhaps he was born out of wedlock, and the Virgin Mary story was an elaborate coverup of his less-than-legitimate origins. But there’s an important thing to remember here. Each gospel was written for a particular purpose and with a particular audience in mind.

If we look at the two gospels that have birth narratives, we can see that they have very different emphases. Matthew’s gospel was written in the context of a community of Jewish Christians, or Christian Jews. Matthew is at pains to show how the claim of Jesus, as Messiah, fits into Jewish history and prophecy. He begins with a lengthy genealogy, which traces Jesus’ descent from King David through Joseph, and not through Mary. Joseph is also the main character in Matthew’s account of the birth, which he places in Bethlehem, to fulfill a prophecy from the prophet Micah. Matthew then sends the Holy Family off to Egypt, in an echo of the stories of Moses and of an earlier Joseph—the one who was sold into slavery by his brothers.

Luke appears to have written for a much more Gentile audience, but his intent is still to advance the claim that Jesus is the Messiah promised by God. Among the pagan religions of that time, it was actually quite common to claim that gods, and other important mythical figures, were born from the union of a divine father and an earthly mother. Perseus, Hercules, Mithras, and the twins Romulus and Remus, were all said to have been conceived in this way. This claim was also made of powerful human leaders, such as Plato and Alexander the Great. Among Luke’s formerly pagan readers, the claim of divine fatherhood helped to advance the claim of Jesus’ divinity.

And so we get the Annunciation, the story of how the Angel Gabriel comes to Mary and announces that she will become the *theotokos*, the “God-bearer” who will bring the divine Christ into human form. Mary’s response to Gabriel: “*Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word,*” has often been held up as an example of her admirable meekness and obedience. But Luke also includes the wonderful Magnificat, or Song of Mary:

*"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever." (Lk. 1:46b-55)*

Here we see *not* spineless obedience, but a fierce celebration of the importance of what God is doing through her— God’s status-overturning act which will bring down the powerful and the wealthy and lift up the poor, the hungry, the oppressed. When we link her “yes” to Gabriel’s message with her exultant song, we realize that what Mary is agreeing to is nothing less than allowing God to use *her* to bring about God’s reign— a reign characterized by justice and peace.

So what can we learn from this? Years ago, a friend of mine went to Italy, and brought me back a gift I treasure— a print of a painting of the Annunciation, by the 15th century Italian painter, Fra Angelico. The thing that intrigues me about this painting is its composition. On the right, we see Mary, kneeling humbly before the angel Gabriel, who stands to the left, with the figure of a man behind him, (presumably the Dominican friar who paid for the painting*), deep in prayer. But in the center— the focal point where I find my eyes drawn again and again— is empty space.

In Medieval and Renaissance paintings, the subject of the painting is usually placed in the center. It’s the place of importance. So what does it mean that the center of this painting is empty? This powerful image reminds us of a simple, but profound, truth. The angel Gabriel comes to each of us, saying, "God wants to be born in you." And, like Mary, each of us stands at the edge of this sacred space, this space where we meet God, knowing that if we step into it, we become God's servants, swept up into God's purposes, no longer in charge of our own destinies.

**I had thought that this third figure was Joseph. However, someone who is far more knowledgeable than I in these matters, told me the following: "According to scholarship, the picture . . . 'reproduces the cell in which it is located.' Hence the person at the left is by no means Joseph but the Dominican friar who presumably lived in that cell (and probably paid for the painting). This is a very typical approach. Note the Dominican habit, which Joseph would not have been wearing."*



It's a scary space. There's a reason Gabriel's first words to Mary were, "*Fear not.*" As I thought about this space between Mary and Gabriel, this space that is filled with God's invitation and challenge— this space that is also offered to us— I began to consider some of the things we do to stay safely on the edge of this space and to keep ourselves from stepping into it. In the spirit of Christmas pageantry, I'd like to try to show you, as well as tell you, how I think many of us struggle with this space and what it might mean to enter it.

(Turn on bright light on pulpit) Imagine that this light is our angel visitor telling us that, this Christmas, Christ wants to be born in our hearts. And, now, here are some possible responses:

(Put paper bag over head.) I don't see anything, do you? I don't hear anything, do you? I don't believe there's anyone there, do you? So, if there's no one there, I don't have to think about it, do I?

(Take off paper bag. Look at light, then put hands over eyes.) I know you're there, but I don't want to look. I don't want to see you. You hurt my eyes. Your light is too bright. You show me things I don't want to see.

(Put fingers in ears.) And I don't want to listen to you either. I don't want to hear what you have to say. My life is fine, just the way it is. I don't need you asking me disturbing questions.

(Look at light and sigh. Pick up dust cloth and start dusting.) Okay, okay, I know you're there, and I know I really should pay attention to you. But can't you see how busy I am? I have so much to do. Presents to wrap, cookies to bake, the house to clean, company coming . . . And just look at this calendar. *(Show full calendar.)* This isn't going to change any time soon. Oh, I suppose I could make some room for you *(flip through several pages)* sometime in . . . June maybe? . . . if I really wanted to.

But . . . I guess I'm scared. I don't know what will happen if I step into this space with you. I might have to change. You might ask me to do things I don't want to do. Look what you asked of Mary. You asked her to risk her life! What if Joseph had rejected her? As an unmarried, pregnant girl, she could have been stoned to death for adultery. I don't know if I have that kind of trust, God— the kind of trust that's willing to put my life completely into your hands.

What's that? It worked for Mary? Well, kind of. I mean she had the baby Jesus, but a stable? Couldn't you have treated her better than that?

Okay, I know. The stable's important. It reminds us of how you turn all our worldly values upside down, those reversals Mary sings about when she praises you for lifting up the lowly and bringing down the powerful.

But that brings up another problem, God. In the world's terms, I'm one of the powerful, one of the rich, one of the privileged. I'm afraid of your reversals. What are you going to ask me to give up?

In the end, Mary had to give up what she held most dear. She had to watch her child being brutally executed. If I allow Christ to be born in me, is it going to take me to places of suffering and loss, places I would rather not go? The world has never been particularly kind to those who really try to live out your values. And I don't know if I can stand to feel the anguish of all the hurting people you ask me to care for.

(pause)

Don't forget the resurrection? Oh! Don't forget the resurrection. Now there's a reversal! Is that what trust means, God? To believe that you have the last word? To believe that you can bring forth good out of the worst evil the world can contrive? To believe that we are held in your love, and that nothing separates us from that love, no matter what? To believe that, if we place our lives in your hands, you will give us not, perhaps, what we want but what we need to become the people you call us to be?

I'm standing on the edge, God. I'm standing on the edge of this incredible space, hearing your invitation, feeling the pull of your love, held back by my own weakness and my lack of trust.

(Long pause and then step toward the light.)

"Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

(Turn off light.)

The 17th century German poet, Angelus Silesius, wrote, *What does it profit me if Gabriel hails the Virgin, Unless he brings to me the very selfsame tidings?* Each one of us stands at the edge of this space— this space in which we are invited to become the *theotokos*, the God-bearer, bringing the love of God and the light of Christ into a world that sorely needs them. What say you to the angel's tidings?

Amen.