



SAINT LUKE'S

“ANNUNCIATION”
CHRISTMAS EVE

ISAIAH 9:2-7
PSALM 96
TITUS 2:11-14
LUKE 2:1-20

A SERMON BY THE REV. CAROLINE STACEY
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When we hear the word “annunciation” what comes to mind? For me and certainly throughout the world of fine art, “Annunciation” evokes the Angel Gabriel announcing to Mary that Jesus will be born in her. From that moment, Mary is the *Theotokos* – literally *God-bearer*. We may have heard from preachers that we are *all*, following Mary, asked to be “God-bearers”, as people of faith. Tonight I invite us to reflect on something else we have in common with Mary. “Annunciation” simply means: to reveal that something important is here. Annunciation is not limited to Mary. Scripture is full of annunciations.

The shepherds receive their own annunciation. The angels say: Look! over there. Without these messengers (which is what “angel” means), the shepherds would be oblivious to what is happening that night, even though Bethlehem is so close by. They can probably see Bethlehem from their hillside. The magi, have also received their annunciation¹ through astrological study, and have already begun their long journey from a far off country towards Bethlehem. Before Mary, Zechariah and Elizabeth receive their annunciation of John the Baptist’s birth.² Joseph also has his annunciation moments. An angel says: do not be afraid to take Mary as your

¹ Mt. 2:1ff., esp. v.12

² Lk. 1:11ff

wife. Marry her.³ Then again through dreams, Joseph receives an annunciation, a message, to keep Jesus safe by going back to Nazareth via Egypt to avoid the murder of Jesus by Herod.⁴ It is essential that Joseph recognizes that these dreams are Divine promptings.

Without God's annunciation of what God is up to, humanity would not know what to notice, where to look, or what the events even in their own lives mean.

There is something else very important about all these annunciations. Annunciations are invitations. Mary could have said No. Scripture indicates Gabriel has a conversation with Mary.⁵ She has questions. It is only after some back and forth that Mary accepts. Gabriel doesn't leave *until* Mary says Yes. (Once God has our attention, God is persistent). The shepherds could have said No. The shepherds could have dismissed their experience. They could have let their heads overrule their hearts. ("Since when does The Lord appear to shepherds? We are imagining this. Shepherds are not important enough to be noticed by powerful people let alone by God".) God takes especially seriously those people who are overlooked by the powerful of this world. The shepherds recognize that God has spoken to them - even to

³ Mt. 1:20

⁴ Mt. 2:13,19,22

⁵ Luke 1:26ff

them - and the shepherds themselves decide to accept the invitation: Let us go to Bethlehem and see for ourselves.

What if annunciation is much more widespread than we often recognize? There is a powerful poem by Denise Levertov titled "Annunciation". Levertov writes:

Aren't there annunciations/or one sort or another/ in most lives?

Then the poem takes a sudden turn of thought:

Some unwillingly / undertake great destinies,/ enact them in sullen pride, /uncomprehending./ More often/ those moments/ when roads of light and storm/open from darkness in a man or woman, / are turned away from/ in dread, in a wave of weakness, in despair/and with relief./ Ordinary lives continue./ God does not smite/ them./ But the gates close, the pathway vanishes.

Levertov reflects that God doesn't punish us when we choose not to accept the invitation, the annunciation, the beckoning in favor of a safer, already-planned road. But the moment passes, the path closes - not because God is dodging or playing hide and seek but because we live in history, in linear time, and all moments pass. When we say No, God's love is so urgent, so gently relentless that God moves on until

someone hears and says Yes. If those shepherds hadn't gone to Bethlehem, the angels would have appeared to others to announce the birth of Jesus. God is never defeated by our Nos, but God can do so much in us when we say Yes.

Annunciation moments are when God offers us a unique and wonderful invitation to bring more light into the world. Annunciation moments connect our individual life to God's life. Annunciations can seem ordinary at first, hard to explain; an intuition or a curiosity or a wondering, but annunciations transform our lives if we can recognize and attend to them. Tonight I invite you to think back over your life and identify those annunciation moments that were luminous, full of wonder, self-forgetfulness and mystery that is hard to define or explain. We may talk ourselves out of taking them seriously; we don't know what to call such experiences. How to categorize it? The author Barbara Brown Taylor⁶ writes of a field of broom grass behind her childhood home in Kansas; of fireflies; of studying little creatures swimming in a nearby stream. That field was her first church, she writes. God met her there. These were experiences of the holy, before she knew Who or what to call it. I think I know what she means. In my early teens, I

⁶ eg. *Barbara Brown Taylor: An Altar in the World*, Ch. 1

had similar experiences walking the fields on the farm where I grew up. I had no idea what to call it. Only that I would arrive back at the farm house full of hope and joyful, high expectation about the future, feeling deeply alive. I wouldn't even have identified myself as a Christian at that time. Only later did I come to understand that those were annunciation moments - the Holy Spirit prompting me to lift my eyes and open my mind to the wonder and possibility of human life, of serving something greater and higher than just myself. Perhaps you can identify similar experiences in your life? Take them seriously - they are intimations of the holy.

What if we choose to hear *and respond* to God's annunciations to us? What would the world be like if everyone followed the paths of light that open from our darkness? All it takes is courage and faith - in God and God's dream for humanity. It may seem that courage and faith are inadequate this Christmas Eve. The darkness in our world seems so thick and resilient. We can name specifics: poverty, oppression, injustice, cruelty, the treatment of migrants at our borders. The darkness of sickening narcissism and selfishness of those in power, serving their short-term political interest rather than those who have so little. The news is full of the worst humanity can do.

Tonight the news is different: good news, not only of Christ's birth but ours.

Each one of us is invited to participate with God in the en-couragement of the world. The light born in Jesus is not only from God, it IS God. The light is not generated by this world and it cannot be extinguished by this world. The light shines on and the darkness will never overcome it.

AMEN

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