

About Annunciations

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Second Sunday of Advent

Good morning.

I requested a pretty unusual introduction this morning, one that includes my maternal lineage, as a way to create expectations what this sermon will be about this morning.

There's some hints that we may touch on women's presence in scripture, including mothers and birth; and maybe something about women's lineage. We'll see.

There IS certainly something in our liturgy that is different this Advent: we in Celebration Circle are bringing a different set of lectionary readings through Advent into Christmastide. Instead of the readings suggested by the Revised Common Lectionary, we are using an alternative lectionary: *A Women's Lectionary for the Whole Church*, a single-year lectionary created by Rev. Dr. Wilda Gafney, an Episcopal priest, and a Hebrew biblical scholar with a doctorate from Duke University, the current Hulsey Professor of Hebrew Bible at Brite Divinity School.

Dr. Gafney' describes her motivation in doing this alternative lectionary as wanting to explore her conviction that it is possible to tell the story of God and God's people fully through using a lectionary that gives emphasis to the most marginalized individuals and groups in the Biblical narratives. And more specifically, she's sought to make women more visible in our lectionaries, so that more people who read and hear these scriptures will see and hear of more biblical persons gendered like themselves; and, importantly, to experience more often a Holy God gendered female, so that they, are reflected as being in God's image, in their gender itself.

As we go through the season, you might notice ways that not only the selection of readings are different, but that some of the language may feel different, as well.

The season of Advent is a very creative time to be using the Women's Lectionary. The word Advent, itself, means something like "Coming Toward": it points to something like a journey that has been started by not completed. It's about waiting, but waiting with a sense of purpose, the sense of a Promise having been given; like a seed that has been planted and has started to grow.

One experience that is very common for humans, as well as other mammals, feels a lot like waiting-with-a-purpose and

with a promise. This experience is physical pregnancy—that period when we know that life is growing inside a womb, even when the outside world knows nothing of it yet.

So it's exciting to me that our lectionary scriptures for this season reflect this metaphor of pregnancy, and focus on scriptural stories of pregnancies and promises of pregnancies. Each of the season's readings from Hebrew scripture, beginning last week, is a story of God's promise of the gift of a child in the near future. There is a subset of these narrative that we call **Annunciations**: in these a divine messenger, or even God themselves, comes to make a promise to a woman that she would bear a child in the not-distant future. The word "Annunciation" is used most often to name the visit of the Angel Gabriel to a young woman of Nazareth to tell her that she would conceive and give birth to a son.

But the first biblical annunciation happened centuries earlier, and it was the subject of the Hebrew scripture we read last week. It's the story of Hagar, the female slave of Abraham's wife, Sarah. Hagar had run away into the desert to escape her harsh treatment at the hands of Sarah, and had gotten as far as a distant desert spring. There, she was greeted by name by an angelic messenger.

When asked by the angelic messenger, she confesses that she has run away from Sarah's harsh treatment. It must have been a shock for her to hear the angel telling her that she is to go back. But then the messenger promises Hagar that she will have her own child—and, in fact, she will have more children than can ever be counted! The visitor then tells her: by "Hagar, you are even now pregnant and will give birth to a son. You will name him Ishmael,—meaning 'God hears'—because God has heard about your harsh treatment."

At that moment, Hagar recognizes that it is God who had been speaking to her! Hagar forthrightly speaks, "You are El Roi"—this means the "God of Seeing."

This is a remarkable story. Hagar saw God, and spoke to God directly— in some ways, it's anticipates the way God became present to Moses and addressed him many years later. I find this quite wonderful—that it is to a desperate slave woman that God in person speaks. And that this moment has been preserved in scripture: so that even now we can know of Hagar, and celebrate her honesty and courage, and also to give thanks to the God who reached out to her with a special care, in a movement of justice and fidelity that transcended tribal covenants and lineages.

As a bit of an aside: it's also interesting to read today's Hebrew scripture, side by side with Hagar's story: in today's story, God also brings a message about another birth that is to come soon: Sarah, too, will soon have a child. But in THIS story, Sarah isn't visited or addressed by an angelic messenger or by God: instead, God speaks to **Abraham, about** Sarah. Much more typical.

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Throughout Advent, the Hebrew scripture readings each week are providing us with annunciation accounts of four women to whom God promised the blessings of conceiving and birthing new life. In parallel, the New Testament readings are providing a more continuous narrative of one special Annunciation: that to one Miriam of Nazareth, whom we call Mary.

Last week's reading tells of God sending an angelic messenger to this very young woman who lives in an insignificant village on a rocky low hillside in rural Galilee. The angel comes to her, and speaks: "Rejoice, Highly Favored One! God is with you! Blessed are you among women!"

Mary is clearly confused by what kind of greeting this might be, and the messenger continues:

Don't be afraid, Mary. You have found favor with God. Listen! You are going to conceive and have a son: he is

destined to be great, and will be known as the Only Begotten of the Most High. Mary's response, essentially, is "How can this be?" and then listens calmly to the messenger's reply.

At this point, I want to turn to a wonderful poem by Denise Levertov, entitled, appropriately, "Annunciation". She begins her poem by recalling for the reader a very typical illustration many of us were given of this scene: a room furnished in what I'd describe as modestly respectable European, where Mary is demurely kneeling, and an angelic messenger has just arrived, in grand attire and on towering wings.

This familiar image is meant to convey an innocent, sheltered young girl; and the message beneath it is this girl-woman would be someone subservient and pliable. Then the poet begins to deconstruct this version of the Annunciation. She writes:

*We are told of meek obedience. No one mentions
courage.*

*The engendering Spirit
did not enter her without consent.*

God waited.

*She was free
to accept or to refuse;—, choice [being]
integral to humanness.*

—

*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.*

Reading this poem, I'm freed up to feel my way into a new image of Mary: one that respects her true location in time and space, as well as a much deeper respect for her soul. I can let myself imagine what would be a truer sense of what her life would have been like, in her family's small house of stone, in a very small village on the rocky hillside. Her part of the hard work of staying alive would have made her sturdy and resilient. It's not a place that would come to mind as most likely to have raised up the mother to the most divine. She wouldn't have been thinking to anticipate the coming of a holy messenger searching for her especially. No wonder Mary was puzzled by the messenger and the greeting.

Here, Mary asks: How will this happen, since I have never been with a man? She isn't asking for proof, she isn't saying no: she's simply curious how it would work.

³⁵ The holy messenger replies, "*The Holy Spirit will come over*

you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you."

For me, that response only creates more questions. But Mary is ready to make her response: "***Here I am,***" she says, like any of the prophets would do. She is ready to make her commitment without knowing much at all about what it will entail, or where it will lead.

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

I've learned that the word for, ***Let it be,*** is the same word that God used in creating the world, where it's translated as: "***let there be.***" But for certain, this phrase is meant to convey something like, "Let it be so", the kind of response given as a kind of go-ahead that something can happen, and the speaker is behind the next actions completely. Mary is saying that she is open to this fully, and she has no desire to have it be any different than it is. She is responding from her deepest, truest self, speaking a "yes" that will change her forever. Just for starters, her becoming pregnant will make her situation scandalous: she will be judged, condemned, ostracized. There is nothing in her life that will be left unchanged.

So, how about us? What does this story mean for our own lives? I'm going to go back again to Denise Levertov's poem:

*Aren't there annunciations [she writes]
of one sort or another
in most lives?*

*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.

So: it probably hasn't escaped your notice that the term, Annunciation, could be taken as the biblical word for Call—which is something that Seekers has explored widely and deeply over the years. This part of Levertov's poem makes this clearer. We each can ponder what knowing and digging into the stories of the annunciations to Hagar and Mary could add to what we have already learned about Call through our lives. What has stood out for me, especially in Mary's story is how much the Holy One's work in the world relies on the quality of response of individuals to the annunciations that our lives are seeded with. She relies on the depth of soul, the receptivity, and the courage with which individuals and communities meet her calls on them.

In our reflection reading this morning, there is a passage:

*Hope is trust in grace unseen, //already there//already
unfolding//*

The seed beneath, the child with.

Hope is surrender to a greater movement,

Acceptance that I am the thread

And the tapestry is vast.

Mary's story invites us to see the word "surrender" as a more active, more deeply responsive, more courageous response than maybe we're used to. For me, I know that this story is inviting, or even pushing me, and us, and ask about the

quality of soul we bring to our lives.

When I was trying to work out how I could take all of this into understandings for my own life, I came to suspect that I likely have seldom tapped into that depth of soul to have much wisdom to offer. questions for us that have emerged from her reading of the the story. She writes:

When the mystery of God's love breaks through into my consciousness, do I run from it?

Do I ask for more details, or assurance that my effort will somehow be a success?

Or am I somehow wise enough and courageous enough to respond from my deepest, truest self, and say a "yes" that could change me forever?

One last thing I want to add before closing: there was a final step in Mary's immediate response to the Annunciation that came to her: after making her spontaneous, whole-hearted commitment, she found herself filled with joy, overflowing with joy. We'll read her song of joy, the Magnificat, as one of the readings next Sunday. I imagine she was dancing as well.

Hoping for what we don't see, watching and listening for seeds of God's love breaking through, in this world that can be difficult, and can even break our hearts, holding on to hope, Mary's invitation to us is to say yes, and then sing and dance for joy.