

Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.

He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High,
and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David.
He will reign over the house of Jacob forever,
and of his kingdom there will be no end."

Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her,

"The Holy Spirit will come upon you,
and the power of the Most High will overshadow you;
therefore the child to be born will be holy;
he will be called Son of God.

And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God."

Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

"The Lord is with you."

When I was a boy, middle school age, I responded to my Catholic education with a strong sense that I had a vocation to the priesthood. My parents were surprised, but not so much that they were not supportive. I was, after all, a devoted altar boy. The idea of being a priest, thinking every day about God, Jesus, the Scriptures, and giving a sermon each week on such thoughts appealed to me. So I am fulfilling part of a lifelong dream standing here today. But I am not fulfilling that vocation that I thought I had heard.

Since then, other vocations have called me. My professional call, to study and teach mathematics, is a far cry from the priesthood. St. Augustine wrote about mathematicians:

"The good Christian should beware of mathematicians and all those who make empty prophecies. The danger already exists that mathematicians have made a covenant with the devil to darken the spirit and confine man in the bonds of hell."

The profession has changed a lot since the fourth century. I don't recall a covenant with the devil as part of my graduate program.

For a long time I have felt called to be a parent, and that calling has changed my life in ways I am still trying to understand. I can recall leaving the hospital with John, our firstborn, and feeling full of fear just at driving home. He's here, he's ours, what do I do next? A few weeks after John was born I met a colleague at the post office who greeted me with 'What's the news?' I answered 'It's a boy' and without hesitation he told me that I would understand what that meant in about twenty years. I look forward to that complete understanding.

Today's gospel tells a private story about a calling. It is commemorated in another part of my Catholic upbringing, the prayer from the rosary, the *Hail Mary*. I can estimate the number of times that I have said the Pledge of Allegiance from the number of days I was in school. I can't estimate the number of *Hail Marys* I said during that time, only to say it was a lot more.

The words of the *Hail Mary*, based on the Gospel of today, are so familiar as to be daunting.

*Hail Mary, full of grace,
the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women,
and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus.*

How do the Hail Mary and the Annunciation speak to us here in Christ Church, at the end of the second millenium (give or take a year)?

Mary's calling to be the mother of Jesus, a name that can be translated as 'he will save,' is extraordinary. As Luke tells it, an angel—he has a name, Gabriel—comes to Mary. He greets her, and asks her to be the mother of the Son of God. Mary is quick to point out her virginity. According to the story she has been betrothed to Joseph, but has not yet come to live with him. The angel responds with how it will happen and he gives her a sign, a miracle—the unexpected pregnancy of her kinswoman Elizabeth who was thought barren.

"Nothing is impossible with God."

The story is extraordinary in every way. It marks the beginning of the fulfillment of words of the prophets. Her courageous acceptance sets in motion the life of Christ and the eventual establishment of the Kingdom of God on Earth. What does this extraordinary event tell us?

I wonder how it might happen in our time. Do you ever get those telemarketing phone calls, usually when you are just about to sit down to dinner? It is always a stranger who calls, interrupting your usual routine to ask for your attention. What if an angel called?

"Hi, Mary? This is the angel Gabriel. How are you this evening? I am calling for God, the Lord of all creation. He is with you, and He has a request to make of you."

The word angel means 'messenger of God.' When a messenger is sent, the sender is apparent. In Luke's story we know that God is there, actively and powerfully.

In the Old Testament God's presence was manifest in great ways—the pillars of cloud and fire leading His people across the wilderness, the plagues against the Pharoah, the parting of the Red Sea.

The world of the Roman Empire for a young peasant woman like Mary was not the kind of place where the presence of a loving God was apparent. Her world was torn apart by the oppressive taxation from a government far away and the political infighting of the neighborhood rulers. The gap between the *haves* and the *have nots* was maintained by these taxes and deepened by the loss of land, taken from the peasantry for the urbanization and commercialization of Galilee under Herod Antipas. (Sound familiar?)

An angel is a sign from God and a sign of his presence. Gabriel told Mary of a miracle worked by God.

The Greek phrase from which we have the angel's greeting, 'the Lord is with you,' appears in Luke without a verb. It is the same phrase from which we take the liturgical formula, 'the Lord be with you.' As Eliot Lindesley told us in his recent sermon, that 'the Lord is with us' has grown less and less apparent to us in our world and time—Chechnya, Kosovo, East Timor. Perhaps this is a fact about the world. Maybe we could do with some angels.

Imagine an angel comes to Poughkeepsie. His greeting could be 'the Lord is with you.' The greeting is about the presence of the God who sent him—He is here with us.

In the post-Easter age of Christianity, we have come to know the presence of God in the example of His Son Jesus. This turns the idea of angels around. Anyone who asks us to follow in the example of Christ is a kind of angel. Our angels are those calling on us for our good works, our good wishes, our patience, and our strengths. Our children are angels when they ask for our love and attention, even when we are least able to easily give it. There are angels in the prisons and on the streets. Our family members are angels when they need our forgiveness—for the eighty-seventh time. Often we are the angels asking that the Lord be with the next person we meet.

What we give of ourselves is how we represent God, and how we fulfill the word of Christ.

Being an amateur at the giving of sermons, I did a little research and discovered some of the sermons of Meister Eckhart, the 13th century German mystic and a model homilist. I found one of his sermons on the Annunciation. His picture of the angel Gabriel is a lot like mine—he did not speak the words of God's call only to Mary, but he spoke to a great multitude, "to every good soul that longs for God."

Christ's life and his eventual redemptive death on the cross begins with the union of the Spirit and the flesh through Mary's acceptance of God's will. When we can accept the Spirit in ourselves, we too can give birth to God's presence on Earth.

Let me end by paraphrasing the *Hail Mary*:

*Hail Christ Church, full of God's grace, the Lord is with you.
Blessed are you to follow in Christ's footsteps,
and blessed be the fruit of your works.*

John McCleary