

Sermon, 4th Advent, Year B, December 20, 2020, Jane A. Beebe

‘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.”’
(Luke 1:35)

Up to now we have heard from the spiritually muscular, almost laser-focused, John the Baptist. Today we hear a new prophetic voice: the voice of one who has a mysterious encounter with the holy. It is the voice of Mary. Mary’s life is transformed by this astonishing conversation with an angel. After she consents to be God’s servant, saying, “Let it be with me according to your word,” the world, too, is transformed by the events that ensue.

We are surrounded by images of Mary as the serene, demure woman in blue. I actually have a picture on my wall at home of just such a Mary. I kind of love her in that image. The Annunciation scene has inspired myriad artists. It graces many Christmas cards. But I am not sure it reflects the reality. My favorite statue of Mary used to stand in the chapel at the Convent of St. Helena when the Sisters still lived in Vails Gate, New York. (The Order of St. Helena is an Episcopal religious community for women). I used to go there whenever I could for retreats. The statue is nearly life-sized; Mary looks like a young woman. She is standing in prayer with her arms upraised, her palms facing inward: the classic *orans* position. This is the stance of a devout Jewish woman in active conversation with her God. This is a woman who followed the Torah, observed the Sabbath and the festivals, recited the

prayers, lit candles, and attended the synagogue.¹ Before Gabriel showed up, I imagine Mary looked forward to a normal domestic existence in a small village: a life supported by faith in God, but not easy.

In the midst of this ordinary life an extraordinary thing happens. Enter an angel sent by God, namely Gabriel. As it says in the hymn:

“The angel Gabriel from heaven came,
his wings as drifted snow, his eyes as flame...”

Once again, we have so many images of beautiful creatures with wings flying around, many playing musical instruments of various kinds. But I have noticed in reading various Scripture passages that involve encounters with angels that they tend to be “in your face.” They are not described as flying around; often there is only one, and that angel is standing on the ground looking you in the eye. This was true for the shepherds described a little later in Luke. No wonder the shepherds were “sore afraid!” (Luke 2:8-20) The story in Luke does not tell us any details of what Mary was doing at the time. That Mary was perplexed doesn’t seem to cover it! So the angel offers the stock angelic reassurance: “Do not be afraid...”

¹ Elizabeth A. Johnson, “Mary of Nazareth: Friend of God and Prophet,” *Living Pulpit* 10, no. 4 (October 1, 2001): 16.

So begins this annunciation of an improbable, impossible birth. This narrative has many elements in common with other stories of unlikely pregnancy from the Hebrew Bible such as Sarah and Abraham or Hannah and Elkanah. To reinforce the wonder of this event, Gabriel also tells Mary her cousin Elizabeth, once thought barren and now too old to bear children, is already six months pregnant. But as some commentators have suggested, it is also possible to interpret this story as a prophetic call. Mary's question to Gabriel: "How can this be?" is very like that of other prophets. One writer compares her to Jeremiah who objects he is too young, and to Moses who protests he cannot speak well.²

A call to prophecy is a call to do something beyond human ability. So together with the call comes God's assurance of divine assistance. Gabriel answers Mary: "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." (Luke 1:35) While preparing a sermon for the Transfiguration one year, I discovered that the word for 'overshadow' used in Luke is the same as that used for the overshadowing cloud that descends on the disciples. Our collect today begins: "Purify our conscience, Almighty God, by your daily visitation..." We are made holy by this enveloping cloud. It may hard to describe exactly what has

² Barbara E. Reid, "Prophetic Voices of Elizabeth, Mary, and Anna in Luke 1-2," in *New Perspectives on the Nativity* (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 38.

happened. We may have the sense that something has changed, though: our resolve is strengthened, or we find comfort where we do not expect it, or we are simply able to let go of what is not important in order to embrace what is.

Like many prophets before her, Mary summons the courage to say, “Yes.” Is it an act of humble obedience? Yes it is. But it is also a risk—possibly even life-threatening in a physical sense. Wonderfully the angel tells Mary that her cousin Elizabeth—believed to be past childbearing—has also conceived. On one level this is meant to show that, “Nothing will be impossible with God.” However, it also means that Mary will not be going through this experience alone. She has a kinswoman whom she can visit, to share the joy and wonder of what has happened.

Mary becomes pregnant with Jesus in a particular time and place. This is a powerful and transcendent moment that leads to the Incarnation of Jesus. That fact means everything to us. But there is metaphorical power, too, in the impossibility of Mary’s pregnancy and Elizabeth’s pregnancy. In the prophetic tradition of the Hebrew Bible some prophets are actually called to embody their messages, sometimes with behavior that is downright strange. Ezekiel, for example, was commanded to shave off his beard with a sword. He is then to burn a third of it, cut up a third of it with the sword, and scatter the other third in the wind, thus depicting the fate of Jerusalem. What can we learn from the sheer impossibility of Mary’s call? What is our hope?

“For nothing will be impossible with God,” says Gabriel. (Luke 1:37) This phrase has stayed with me as I prayed this Scripture passage. And then it was unlocked for me. The literal translation from Greek is this: “Will not be impossible - from God - every word.” The word for “thing” is the same as the word for “spoken utterance” or “message.” The same Greek word is used when Mary says, “Be it unto me according to your **word**.” In our culture we work hard to make things happen. **Things**. But God’s Word is something else again. God’s Word existed at the beginning. God’s Word can be born in us. To be in a state of gestation is to have hope—sometimes a fragile hope, but hope nonetheless. It is still Advent. There is still time to hear Gabriel’s promise to Mary, to us. “The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart.” (Romans 10:8)

