

Reflections for the Annunciation

Luke 1:26-38

The angel Gabriel was sent from God
to a town of Galilee called Nazareth,
to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph,
of the house of David,
and the virgin's name was Mary.

And coming to her, he said,
"Hail, full of grace! The Lord is with you."
But she was greatly troubled at what was said
and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

Then the angel said to her,
"Do not be afraid, Mary,
for you have found favor with God.
Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son,
and you shall name him Jesus.

He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High,
and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father,
and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever,
and of his Kingdom there will be no end."

But Mary said to the angel,
"How can this be,
since I have no relations with a man?"

And the angel said to her in reply,
"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 called holy, the Son of God.
And behold, Elizabeth, your relative,
has also conceived a son in her old age,
and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren;
for nothing will be impossible for God."

Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord.
May it be done to me according to your word."
Then the angel departed from her.

"Annunciation"

Denise Levertov (1923-1997)

We know the scene: the room, variously furnished,
almost always a lectern, a book; always
the tall lily.

Arrived on solemn grandeur of great wings,
the angelic ambassador, standing or hovering,
whom she acknowledges, a guest.
But 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
integral to humanness.

Aren't there annunciations
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.

She had been a child who played, ate, slept
like any other child—but unlike others,
wept only for pity, laughed
in joy not triumph.
Compassion and intelligence
fused in her, indivisible.

Called to a destiny more momentous
than any in all of Time,
she did not quail,
only asked
a simple, 'How can this be?'
and gravely, courteously,
took to heart the angel's reply,
the astounding ministry she was offered:
to bear in her womb
Infinite weight and lightness; to carry
in hidden, finite inwardness,
nine months of Eternity; to contain
in slender vase of being,
the sum of power—
in narrow flesh,
the sum of light.

Then bring to birth,
push out into air, a Man-child
needing, like any other,
milk and love—
but who was God.
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.

"The Annunciation"

John Donne (1572-1631)

Salvation to all who will is nigh,
That All, which always is All everywhere,
Which cannot sin and yet all sins must bear,
Which cannot die, yet cannot choose but die,
Lo, faithful Virgin, yields himself to lie
In prison, in thy womb; and though he there
Can take no sin, nor thou give, yet he will wear
Taken from thence, flesh, which death's force
may try.
Ere by the spheres time was created, thou
Wast in his mind, who is thy son, and brother,
Whom thou conceiv'st, conceived; yea thou art now
Thy Maker's maker, and thy Father's mother;
Thou hast light in dark; and shutt'st in little room,
Immensity cloistered in thy dear womb.

Reflection Questions

- Art, whether poetry, visual art, or music, can be a great way to encounter a familiar scripture passage. Has there been a work of art that gave you new insight into the story of the Annunciation?
- The angel Gabriel announces God's plan for Mary, and Mary consents, even though she may have been uncertain or afraid. When was the last time you had to choose to make an act of trust in God? How did it feel? What happened after?
- God calls Mary to an incredible mission, lived out in the humble circumstances of her daily life. How is God calling you to follow Him in your daily life?