

Fourth Sunday of Advent, B  
2 Samuel 7:1-11  
Romans 16:25-27  
Luke 1:26-38

Melinda J. Wagner  
First Immanuel Lutheran Church  
Portland, Oregon  
December 20, 2020

Today we reflect on the Annunciation, the angel announcing that Mary would bear a Son. But it wasn't just an announcement -- that makes Mary sound like a passive receiver. Instead, it was a give-and-take conversation. And in the deepest sense, it was God calling Mary to a special ministry.

The Bible wants us to know that Mary ranks right up there with all the other leaders God has specially called and blessed to serve God's people. That's why this story is written in the style of many other call stories in scripture. When Moses or Isaiah or other prophets were first called to serve God, it always started with a vision of God's holiness -- Moses saw a burning bush, Mary met an angel. When the prophets heard what their mission would be, the first thing they did was object. Moses said, "But I'm a terrible public speaker!" Mary said, "But I'm a virgin!" But in each case, God promised to help them. For Mary: *"The Holy Spirit will come upon you... Nothing will be impossible with God."* Then the chosen ones -- Moses, Isaiah, Mary -- finally agreed, just like Mary did: *"Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."* The Bible wants us to know that Mary was anything but passive when she said Yes to God. She was as brave as Moses, as brave as Isaiah, when she agreed to let God change her life -- and the life of the whole world.

Mary has been envisioned in different ways throughout Christian history. In the great European galleries, Mary is always the picture of femininity, dressed in yards of silk like a woman of leisure. (Picture 1 -- Piermatteo d'Amelia 1475) In this 14<sup>th</sup> century Italian painting Mary is strolling the halls of a palace, reading a prayer book. Other times she is sitting doing needlework or spinning when the angel arrives. You will almost always see a lily, the symbol of purity, and also a dove, the Holy Spirit -- this one's diving down on a beam of light. From this painting it would be easy to forget that Mary was a teenager, maybe 13 or 14, and certainly was not protected by this kind of wealth and privilege.

Contemporary artists have revealed more dimensions of Mary. Increasingly, artists envision her as a woman with brown skin, which she definitely was, living in the Middle East. (Picture 2 -- James He Qi -- pronounce *ho chee*) The Chinese American artist James He Qi imagines Mary playing a flute when the angel interrupted her life. You can see the Spirit dove and the lily of purity, and also the light of Christ which could very well be an Easter candle, symbolizing Christ's victory. Mary is wearing royal purple, the color of

Lent, and see how strong she is, how boldly she meets the angel's gaze. This Mary is bold and courageous enough to walk with her Son all the way to the cross, and she will.

The artist John Collier (Picture 3—John Collier- **enlarge**) leaves no doubt about Mary's age. She's a schoolgirl in saddle shoes, in a 1950's suburban neighborhood. She's holding a school book. That potted lily on the sidewalk could have been brought home from Easter services. Can you notice the dove on the rooftop? God's Spirit is at work! Surprised on her doorstep, just coming home from school, Mary is about to walk through a different kind of doorway as God rearranges all her plans.

We mentioned how the angel interrupted Mary (Picture 4 – Maximus). Well, how about this teenage Mary? She's in the middle of watching a video or listening to a song – and about to be tapped on the shoulder by a divine hand. This Mary doesn't read books, it's her phone that connects her to the world. What will the newborn Savior mean for electronically-connected people like us? We're finding out even this morning, how good news can flow through the internet, how God's Spirit uses every means possible to connect and renew people in love and hope and trust and faith. We want to be part of that! And I believe this young Mary will want to be part of it too.

Perhaps the most famous modern image of the Annunciation was painted by Henry Ossawa Tanner in 1898 (Picture 5 – Henry Ossawa Tanner, 1898). Tanner is remembered as the first modern African-American artist to achieve international fame. His mother was born into slavery and his father was a bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. This striking and luminous painting is one of Tanner's greatest works. Mary is alert but she's not afraid. Her face is curious and somehow wise despite her youth. Father Kenneth Tanner says, *"In this painting, [the Angel] Gabriel appears as a bright rip in space, a bolt of fire in midair, and has Mary's fearless attention. Thank God she said yes. Or we would be lost. Thank God for her humility. Thank God for the humility of her Son and Lord. All of our notions of power are defeated by divine weakness, by the overcoming reality of Love."* (FB post)

(Most of these photos can be viewed online at Global Christian Worship: A Potpourri of Contemporary Annunciation Art  
<https://globalworship.tumblr.com/post/183704139905/a-potpourri-of-contemporary-annunciation-art>)

As I view this painting from our historical moment in 2020, I can't help noticing... doesn't it look to you like this young woman could be -- in quarantine? I can't help but think she could be waiting out an uncertain extended number of days of isolation, alone in her room, with that wrinkled, striped robe and rumpled bed. And yet, she is not alone, is she? She is never isolated from God. Into her darkened room shines that bright, fiery rip

in space, a holy messenger, God's Spirit, the Creator breaking in with a good word, a high calling, a promise. We might even think of it as a light at the end of the tunnel, breaking into that darkness and making it shine.

Even in the dark of Mary's situation, God is active. In fact, God is working the greatest work we can imagine. God is saving the world by becoming part of it, being born in the flesh, in Jesus. God is entering every place of darkness and loneliness, every place of uncertainty and worry, every place of illness and pain and loss. God is coming to save. (stop sharing picture)

In the Eastern Orthodox Church they call Mary the "God-Bearer" (*Theotokos* in Greek). Mary is revered for literally bearing the child Jesus in her own body and giving him birth. And more than this, Mary is seen as a model for every person who follows Christ-- the model of a "God-bearing life," which is a beautiful way to describe our Christian way. Because every one of us has the privilege of bearing God's love to the world. Every one of us has the blessing of God's living, breathing presence with us, and every one of us is able to share God's living, loving being with others.

In these times of Covid, each one of us has been called upon to bear so much. We are bearing loads of worry about this disease, we are bearing the brunt of poor planning that has forced us to a full stop. Many are bearing financial hardships and other personal burdens and cares. Too many are bearing the symptoms of Covid-19, bearing the physical damage, or bearing the grief of having lost loved ones to this virus. And God knows just what we are bearing, even when others may not be aware.

We are bearing each other's burdens and doing our best to support each other, reaching out, keeping up friendships and relationships, so people are not so alone, especially in the holidays. We are bearing with each other. We are bearing up, holding on. We are trying to bear together as a nation.

And in the midst of this, we have the privilege of bearing God. We are living the God-bearing life whenever we try to do the loving thing, when we exercise patience and generosity and forgiveness. We are God-bearers when we tell the truth and refuse to be complicit in lies. We are God-bearers as we seek justice for all people, work for peace, fight racism and hatred, and open our hearts to those who are in need. We are God-bearers when we cultivate hope and foster courage. When we're honest about the pain and open to God's help.

And while we are bearing God to the world... the truth is, it is God who is bearing us. God is carrying us, we are being carried on the grace of God's abounding love for all. When our hearts are breaking, God bears us up on eagle's wings. When our spirits are

low, God bears with us, God will not let us strike our foot against a stone. And God, born at Christmas, our Savior Christ becoming part of humanity, will never desert us.

Mary shows us the way. Mary the God-bearer, chosen and called, blessed and willing, shows us how to welcome God into our lives.

Mary shows us the way of Yes.

The way of “here am I” – your daughter, your son, your beloved child.

The way of trust in God who soon is born among us.

With Mary we say, “Here we are, Lord. Let it be with us according to your word.”

Amen.