

## Mary Receives a Visitor

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Texts: Isaiah 11:1-10, Luke 1:26-28

Isaiah 11:1-10

A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse,  
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,  
the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might,  
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear;

but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,  
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;

he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,  
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.

Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid,  
the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.

The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together;  
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,  
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.

They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain;  
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples;  
the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

Luke 1:26-38

*Last week, we heard the stories of four women - four survivors, all with tainted histories, who became part of Jesus' story not in spite of who they were, but because of who they were: unlikely vessels, chosen by God to carry on the precious message of God's all-embracing love. We heard how courageous, persistent, smart, and faithful they were: those same qualities were passed down from generation to generation, and lived on in Mary and in her son Jesus. I invited you to look back through the generations of your own ancestry, and ponder the gifts you received from your grandmothers. But today we begin to look at another woman's story, one that has captured the hearts and imaginations of people through the ages. This is Mary's story, and it begins with a chapter called "The Annunciation."*

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. Word of God, Word of Life.

How do I begin a story that has no beginning and no end? A story that laughs at impossibilities, that seizes fear of the unknown future and shakes it into faith and a peace beyond understanding? Today’s chapter of the neverending story begins with an immortal angel greeting a mortal woman, like eternity slicing into time. The angel is Gabriel, meaning the strength of God; the woman, Mary.<sup>1</sup>



First, let’s get one thing clear. Angels are scary; Mary was more than perplexed; she was agitated, trembling, bowled over. That’s why the *second* thing Gabriel says is, “Don’t be afraid.” Angels in the Bible are warriors and messengers: in both Old Testament Hebrew and New Testament Greek, the word for angel and messenger is the same. And does Gabriel have a message for Mary! You know what it was. Jesus. “How?” she asks. The answer is simple. “Because God says so.” Does this shift Mary’s fear to trust, her perplexity to peace? Apparently so. Mary, inexperienced but willing, receives the divine visitor. But how did believers receive the miracle? Pictures tell the story better than words.



Back before literacy was common and Bibles found their way into every bedside table of every hotel room, the story was told in pictures. Stained glass, sculpture, and paintings warmed the hearts of people, and drew them to God. Contemplate these Annunciations with me: First, Fra Filippo Lippi, 1445-1450 (Late Medieval)

What elements do you see? What stands out to you? In addition to the figures of Mary and Gabriel (and BTW, the painter obviously didn’t get the memo about angels being scary): Haloes (holiness), lilies (purity), dove (Holy Spirit), hands from heaven (God), reading stand (people of the Middle Ages believed to be Mary, an not ignorant peasant). Mary is clothed in a blue cloak over a red garment: the color of heaven overshadowing the red of human flesh and blood.

<sup>1</sup> Archangels pictured are L-R, top to bottom: Michael, “Who is equal to God?” (wars with Satan in Revelation), Gabriel, “Strength of God,” (announces Jesus’ birth among other tasks), Raphael, “God has healed,” (patron of travelers and medical folk) and Uriel, “Flame of God,” (patron of wisdom and knowledge).

Right, Juan de Flandes, 1508-1519. Below, Luis Juárez (ca.1585 - 1639) What elements persist?



But compare, right: Henry Ossawa Tanner, 1898. What's different? What's missing? Why do you think that is? The transition from late Middle Ages to Renaissance saw great social upheavals in Europe, culminating in new understandings, new political systems, new interpretations of the Bible, and a spirituality that emphasized the Inner Light and personal revelation.



How about this 20th century painting by Frank Wesley of India, called Annunciation in a Pavilion? Christianity has become a global religion, and devotional art changes to reflect its context.

### But what got into Mary?

As I was exploring pictures of the Annunciation - and believe me, there are millions more out there, I began wondering about Mary's pregnancy. Nine crucial months separate annunciation from birth. What was happening? The Gospels give us some hints at external events, but *what got into Mary?* How did people think about this? What would it be like to have this piece of God growing inside you? Is there such a thing as a "piece" of God? And how does pregnancy work, anyway? Then I wondered if I was romanticizing the whole affair, which even for Mary probably meant morning sickness and backaches and cravings for dill pickles and ice





cream, which was unfortunate, because they weren't readily available then, nor do any ultrasound images survive from the 1st century. And I have no first-hand experience. So I did what women do: I asked my friends: Melece, who's had four babies, and Laura the midwife, who's had two of her own and delivered hundreds of others.

Here's a fraction of Laura's wisdom: the uterus is a tiny muscle, barely noticeable until it's needed. Then its strength becomes apparent, stretching as the fetus grows, squishing every other organ. "The womb is the perfect container, expanding as necessary but also setting boundaries, just as children need room to grow, but they also need limits to keep them safe," Laura says, adding, "I like to think of the baby dancing in the womb." Midwives know: Every birth is a miracle.<sup>2</sup>



Melece confirmed: as soon as you become pregnant, you change. Your hormones start romping through you, playing havoc with your emotions. "I helped my husband Jake study for his obstetrics exam when I was pregnant myself, until I couldn't stand it any more. There are just too many things that can go wrong." Every birth is a miracle.



But she also told me something about earlier portrayals of Mary that I'd never heard of before: The Opening Virgin, also known as the Medieval Madonna Shrine. These portable carved works of devotional art were first made in the 12th Century and continued for several hundred years: Mary is depicted as the Mother of all things, holding in her own womb the Holy Trinity, or scenes from Jesus' life, Christ crucified, the universal church, and indeed all believers. They kindle spiritual understanding and longing, they are a manifestation of the infinite God hiding God's self in the secret sea of the womb. Art and music bring out in us what words can't touch; they evoke a deep and aching emotion. It's what they're meant to do. The Medieval Mary is



not seen as God, but as the portal, the opening door between God and us, heaven and earth. "The universal Mother, nourishing and protecting everything,...she is the life in all life."<sup>3</sup> Every sadness, every glory, every agony, every triumph humanity can know is present *in potential* in the womb...



<sup>2</sup> Four diagrams of babies in the womb. Engraving by W. Taylor, 1791.

<sup>3</sup> Adapted from Joseph Campbell, *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, and Elina Gertsman, *Worlds Within: Opening the Medieval Shrine Madonna*. Images: Virgin of Bergara, Spain (mid 15th C.), Virgin of Trinidad (date unknown), (Vierge Ouvrante, Musee de Cluny, Paris (14th C.), Virgin of Allariz, Spain (late 13th C.)





Where does this leave us, modern Christians that we are? I am not saying we should worship Mary; not at all. But I invite you to taste how sacred art can open you to experiencing the feminine nature of God, tapping into human history through a woman's womb.

God is not any longer merely a white bearded fellow in the sky; God is also the womb who gives us all life, who expands as we grow in understanding, but who still gives us limits to live by. There are worlds within worlds and so many things in heaven and on earth that we don't know. Our personal stories are just a blip in time; but generation after generation persists. God's story has no beginning and no end; God's story laughs at impossibilities. And we, even flawed as we are, can be God's chosen vessels, too. God's angels visit us, God's infinite love surrounds us and grows within us if we receive it, turning our fear to faith, our perplexity to peace. The peace of Christ be with you now. Amen.

### **Prayers**

God of time and eternity, heart of heaven, soul of earth, break into our small, time-bound lives and open us to experiencing you in new ways. Grow in us as we grow in you. Help us to remember that you are greater than the events and ideas of any single era.

At the same time, you make us your agents, vessels to carry your grace and goodness to the world. Arouse in us a deep compassion for all who suffer for any reason; when need seems overwhelming, inspire us to do all we can and trust the rest to you.

Bring us more fully into a sense of your presence and your peace during this Advent season. Guide us as your church here in Rochester to make a difference, not for our own glory but for yours.

Teach us to extend tender and healing hands to those whose lives are troubled by illness or other distress, and for all we name in our hearts. Bring to those who mourn the peace that passes understanding. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen