

Fourth Sunday of Advent Reflection

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“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”

Nazareth may be a small town in Galilee but it has a church, actually, a ponderous cathedral named the Church of the Annunciation. One can easily be overwhelmed by the spacious interior with its many unique representations of that scene with the angel Gabriel and Mary...Yet, something teases us to search within this massive building, perhaps leading us to a more realistic and believable portrayal. This spacious cathedral holds too much grandeur for one whose imagination has captured a more appropriate spot for a meeting between angels and human beings....

Ah, yes, we eventually find the answer. Cautiously edging our way down several flights of stairs we arrive at what appears to be a hovel, almost a cave-like dwelling....we question ourselves, "Has this hallowed place actually been preserved for almost two thousand years?"

Denise Levertov, in her poem *The Annunciation* scoffs at the pious and artificial scene when she states, "We know the scene: the room, variously furnished, almost always a lectern, a book, always the tall lily—Arriving on solemn grandeur of great wings comes the angelic ambassador. And Mary, standing or hovering, acknowledges a guest.....

"But we are told of meek obedience. No one mentions courage." Yet, as pilgrims to this Nazareth scene, we are simply transfixed by the mystery of it all....not a florid, pious caricature or holy card portrayal but an angel who knows something about Mary she does not know about herself. She is full of grace. In short her center is an abundant overflowing spirit. This spirit is called into service in a Divine mission. "The Lord is with you," means God is working out Divine

purposes in her life.... Yet, this simple, young maiden, is troubled...this angel sees her ultimate service, her lifelong purpose much more than she sees herself and her identity... and, although the angel's words are perplexing, Mary ponders them. We are not made aware of time involved. We simply are told, "Mary pondered these words."

The Angel senses Mary's discombobulation... His words counter her fear with an assurance of favor...yet this presence of Divine grace in the center of her being incites a piercing fear and not reassurance with a profound peace in Mary as a gift of love. Gabriel spells out the mission in more detail and in increasing mind-blowing proportions....It demands that she become pregnant and bring forth God's Son whose mission is to bring about God's Kingdom on earth...her mission will encounter hardships beyond all understanding. This kind of conception entails opennessand beyond openness, cooperation with the Holy Spirit....But essential is the insight and cooperation that enables persons to accomplish things they previously believed to be impossible. What is often considered impossible from a strictly human standpoint becomes

possible when God is working through the human and God works through the human in each of our lives.

Mary's emotion, however, points out the terror of decision...She stands on the ledge of courage and leaps...Her tenacious will engages her in total commitment to a future that is not her own...

Yes, in the pious, humble scene from the Gospel book, there is no mention of courage...The engendering Spirit did not enter her without consent....As Denise Levertov stated...."God waited. She was free to accept or to refuse, choice that is integral to our humanness...."

This Gospel narrative is not limited to a Biblical encounter between a heavenly Angel and a simple, Jewish woman. This scene is meant to reach across the centuries, the sands of time, in every human heart and will. We all belong to God. Our mission is to join in God's work, to help construct the house the Divine is building... To grasp this in faith, this profound truth, will call for conversion

and transformation...Often our smaller plans and self-centered ambitions startle us in confronting decisions we never imagined. Often this is not a fast process. Eventually, for many, the mind does move from darkness, to light, and the light beckons the will to follow. This is the moment when many of us can be paralyzed. Fear can be more powerful than favor. Playing it safe is the entrenched habit; risking can be dangerous territory.....

Perhaps it is sudden crisis of illness, loss of loved one, loss of job, loss of friendship, and events with demands beyond human grasp and understanding.....Yet, as Levertov poses the question, "Aren't there annunciations of one sort or another in most lives?" Some of us unwillingly undertake great destinies, enact them with 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 or despair and with relief. Ordinary lives continue. God does not smite or kill us....but, the gate closes, the pathway vanishes....The challenge can be soul-searching, to live into the life of Christ, to make specific choices away from wants....and self

satisfactions to lighten the burdens of others. These can be the hardcore stuff of faith-filled endurance and trust. To be open amid the darkness and the mystery often demands anguish and stumbling, searing pain and frustration. Yet, within the “pondering all these things in our hearts,” we often, urged by grace, yearn for a “Yes,” “Let it be done according to Thy Will.” Sometimes now or later, we are made aware this “Yes” has brought about new life for us and a sense of deep peace...Often this happens when the pages of life are turned and we can look back away from the fog and confusion that once engulfed us.

And what about the simple scene deep down in the lower level of the Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth....what of the Mary who pondered and replied. 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.

Called to a destiny more momentous than any in all time, she took to heart the angel’s

message...perceiving the astonishing mystery she was offered...She said, "Yes, be it done unto me." And she brings forth a Man-child needing like any other, milk and love.

Angelic visitations are for special people. Yet, Denise Levertov thinks every life is visited by revelations and calls to commitment. However, we either begrudgingly agree and become joyless people, cursed by our own call, or we turn away in weakness and relief. Levertov believes when this happens the gates close...the offer is rescinded..... However, aside from this belief, perhaps God , with infinite wisdom and unconditional love, will send us another angel.