

“Let it Be”
A Sermon based on Luke 1:26-38
Rev. Dr. Ruth Ragovin
The Fourth Sunday in Advent
December 20, 2020



The Cestello Annunciation
1489 by Sandro Botticelli.

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I don't know about you but I'm getting serious cabin fever. I'm itching to go somewhere, anywhere but, since I take the recommendations of our Governor and denominational leaders seriously regarding safe practices during the pandemic, the furthest from home I may venture over the next few weeks is a trip to Sams in Paducah. Yet, even if I'm stuck in my home or office at church, I have so many wonderful memories of the various places I have visited around the world. For that I am grateful.

This morning I was thinking about a special trip I once took the week before Christmas. For a period of time we lived in southern Germany, first in Tübingen during some of my middle and high school years and then later when I did graduate studies in Munich. A trip to Italy was an inexpensive and easy train ride away. On at least fourteen different occasions I went down to Italy for the weekend and checked into a youth hostel. The purpose of the trip was to indulge in a secret guilty pleasure of mine. No, not Italian food or wine or cappuccino or opera or romance. Rather great works of art. Starting in my earliest childhood when I poured endlessly over a book that contained pictures of the great works of the masters my soul has been fed through art. I often wonder whether I should have studied art history rather than theology and when I retire I plan to take courses in art history here at the university.

Art has served for me as a gateway to the divine, with awe as an accompanying emotion. Music does this for other people. There have even been a few occasions when art has transported me into another realm and visual images have brought me closer to better understanding a story in the Bible than commentaries have. This happened one week during Advent when I walked into the Uffizi gallery in Florence, Italy. I stood in front of the 15th-century altar piece painted in 1489 by the great master Sandro Botticelli entitled *The Cestello Annunciation*. When I first saw this painting I gasped. It literally took my breath away as I felt as though I was standing with one foot in this world with the other foot moving into the next. The subject of the painting, the Annuciation, was one countless other artists have depicted over time and, by that point in my life, I had seen many. Google "Annunciation" and just feast your eyes on all the artistic depictions of it. Underneath the painting, on the original frame, were the words from Luke 1:35: "***The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.***"

The Annuciation, or 'announcement' is the title usually given to the story in Luke's Gospel 1:26-38 where, right after the Angel Gabriel had appeared to Zechariah and announced that his aging wife Elizabeth would bear a son they were to name John, this same angel is sent by God on another mission on earth. This time the Angel Gabriel appears to a teenaged girl named Mary to announce that she has been chosen by God to

bear God's son. Do you remember the story of this Annunciation? Let me read it to you in the New Revised Standard Version from Luke 1:26-37:

²⁶ In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." ²⁹ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰ The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³² 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. ³³ He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." ³⁴ Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" ³⁵ 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. ³⁶ 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. ³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God."

There are many things that are typical about Sandro Botticelli's portrayal of the Annunciation, which was painted in tempera on a panel for the church of the Florentine monastery of Cestello. On the left is the angel Gabriel, depicted as a handsome muscular young man dressed in a red robe with flowing hair, golden wings, halo on his head, carrying a lily in his hand, which is the traditional symbol of the Virgin Mary in Renaissance art and also, as a funereal flower, may presage the crucifixion. To the right stands Mary, with a red dress covered with a vibrant blue robe, a color always associated with Mary. There is a lectern in front of her. Gabriel has interrupted her reading, also often found in paintings of the Annunciation. We see Gabriel greeting her, announcing that God has found favor with her, not meaning that she is better than anyone else or has somehow earned God's favor through good works. Rather finding favor with God simply means that Mary is the recipient of God's grace. Gabriel has been commissioned by God to bring her a strange message. Mary will conceive in her womb and give birth to a baby boy. She will not have the pleasure of choosing his name, something most women spend hours pondering. Rather God has named him Yeshua, or Jesus in English, which means "Yahweh / God saves." As the Son of the Most High, this baby will grow up to be great, since he will be granted the throne of King David, and his kingdom will have no end. She also is told he will be holy and called Son of God.

Mary, a teenager perhaps only thirteen or fourteen years old, lives in an outpost called Nazareth in Galilee under the humiliating Roman occupation where not much interesting ever seems to happen. Judy Lyle described Mary's reaction by saying she was "gobsmacked" by Gabriel's announcement. She begins to absorb this startling news. We see her mind at work processing this information as she asks one simple and very practical question: How can this be? I've not been with a man so how could I become pregnant? Gabriel tells her that it is through the power of the Holy Spirit that she will conceive. Nothing is impossible with God, Gabriel tells Mary. After all, your own aging cousin Elizabeth who was barren is now six months pregnant! It would seem by reading this passage contextually that this is the first that Mary has even heard of Elizabeth's pregnancy. After all, Elizabeth lived in another town. Gabriel seems to be telling Mary that if God opened up the womb of an infertile post-menopausal woman, why would God not be able to perform an even greater miracle by having Mary conceive without the participation of a man?

Botticelli powerfully captures this spiritually charged moment when time and space are abrogated and provides a kind of visual theology. In his painting, it appears that the angel Gabriel realizes that Mary might not agree to having God's son housed in her womb as a way to get him smuggled onto planet earth. It is far from a done deal. In our Judeo-Christian tradition, people, including teenaged girls, have something called free choice. That's what the story about the Garden of Eden showed us. God might want us to do certain things but God never imposes God's will on us. We always have the freedom to say yes or no.

Even though most artists have depicted Mary as a passive vessel who did not have a choice in carrying God's son, Botticelli illustrates the free choice she has. She is not painted as a frail, frightened teenager but a strong, independent, and very powerful woman. She is not the kneeling virgin we see in most depictions of the Annunciation but she is standing on her own two feet, grounded in her convictions and following her own internal compass. She hears God's offer for her to play a significant role in the salvation history of the human race and takes time to carefully consider it. The body language and posture of both the angel Gabriel and Mary illustrate their inner spiritual life. Mary draws back as Gabriel, realizing that it is in no way a done deal, kneels down before her in what looks like an act of deference. He reaches out his right hand toward her as if to plead and summon. One sees Mary almost pushing him away, further withdrawing, as if to say "give me some space". And, indeed, there is a space between them both spatially and temporally as Gabriel waits for Mary's answer. There is, so to speak, a "pregnant pause"!

There are two beautiful legends related to this exact moment in the Annunciation story. The first is that Mary was not the first person Gabriel went to as a possible person to smuggle God's son into the world in her womb. Every other person had considered the implications of this. What would it mean to be an unwed mother who was pregnant? Would she be stoned to death? Excommunicated from the Temple? Disowned by her parents? Thrown away by her fiancé who suspected her of having been with another man either of her own free will or because she had been raped? What would it mean to possibly raise this boy as a single mother? Would she end up scorned, ostracized, homeless, impoverished? Would she be one of the women who had to beg on the streets to get a piece of bread to feed her son? The implications of carrying God's baby in this manner are immense. Other young women whom Gabriel had approached had immediately said NO WAY! But maybe Mary of Nazareth was different. Maybe she would do what no other had the courage undertake. In Luke's Gospel and in Botticelli's magnificent painting, the angel Gabriel waits to hear Mary's reply.

In the second legend, during this moment when Mary exercises her free will and the angel Gabriel waits for her reply, it is not only Gabriel who waits but the entire universe waits with him. Everything stops. Every planet and star in the sky. Every fish in the sea. Every bird in the air. Every animal on earth. Every angel in heaven. Every wave in the ocean. It is like when you press "pause" when watching a movie and everything stops. Every living thing on heaven and earth stops and turns their attention toward Mary, waiting expectantly to hear Mary's reply.

We are challenged to see Mary in a brand new light. Perhaps she was not merely a passive female vessel in whom God placed God's son without her knowledge or consent as we have been taught our whole lives in many churches and commentaries. What if Mary exercised free agency and was given a choice to carry God's son and play a role in our salvation history? That may be why Botticelli depicts her as a mature, strong woman who took seriously the choice in front of her. The word the Bible uses for Mary is that she was a person who "pondered" things in her heart. She carefully considered all the implications of this decision, the pros and cons. Gabriel reached out and pleaded for her to reply. She distanced herself from his pressure, reaching out her hand as if to push him away, indicating that she needed more time to decide whether she would carry the Christ child into the world. The poet Denise Levertov depicts this sacred pregnant pause in her poem "Annunciation":

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.*

...

*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,
perceiving instantly
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 –*

Baptist, as the two women processed their unlikely pregnancies with one another, following which Mary returned to her village to share her pregnancy with her fiancé Joseph, her parents, and extended family. She discovered that God also had sent the angel Gabriel to Joseph in a dream and he now supported her in her pregnancy and agreed to raise God's child (Matt 1:16-22). Yes, courage unparalleled that opened Mary up utterly to give birth to and to raise a spirited child, who grew up to bring an unpopular message of a countercultural form of mercy and justice learned at his mother's knee in which God, in his mother Mary's own theological language: ***"has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. ⁵²He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; ⁵³he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty."*** (The Magnificat, Lk 1:51-53). Yes, courage unparalleled that opened Mary up utterly to vicariously share in her son's suffering as he was crucified on a cross as a common criminal because all the authorities—both secular and religious—were afraid of the implications of his message. And, yes, she would need all the courage she could muster, because the story of the Annunciation ends with these words: ***Then the angel departed from her*** (Lk 1:38b). Gabriel vanished. Poof! The reality set in. Mary, with her consent, had agreed to give birth to God's son.

As we are walking away from Sandro Botticelli's painting of the Annunciation, we notice something else. There is a window looking out from the room the angel Gabriel and Mary are in. We expect to see a 1st-century Galilean landscape with simple peasants doing chores, perhaps some donkeys with loads on their back, some women gathered at the village well. What we see instead is a 15th-century landscape of Florence, Italy, made obvious by the inclusion of the famous Ponte Vecchio bridge. Is the artist perhaps telling us that the angel Gabriel broke into the world in which he lived, asking those present whether they, too, would give birth to the Christ Child in the world around them? And is not God asking us, with Mary, in our own personal annunciations to give birth to the Christ child right here in Murray, KY, by carrying the light of God's hope, peace, joy, and love into all the many places of darkness in our hurting world?

On this fourth Sunday in Advent, when we are only days away from welcoming the Christ Child into this world, let us add our voices with millions of others who, over the centuries, have lifted up this famous prayer of praise and thanksgiving, as we say:

Closing Prayer: Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you;
blessed are you among women,
and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus. Amen.