
Homily on the Feast of the Annunciation

The Reverend Deacon Edward Fuller
March 25, 2007
The Cathedral of St. Philip, Evensong 4:00 p.m.

The Lord himself will give a sign to the House of David says Isaiah. A sign not asked for but freely given. "The young woman is with child and will bear a son and she will name him Immanuel". Do you suppose that when Ahaz heard this he had even the slightest inkling of the events being foretold by Isaiah? This prophesy is fulfilled in Luke's gospel account of the Annunciation. The angel Gabriel comes to Mary to tell her that by the power of the Holy Spirit, she will conceive and bear a son and she shall name him Jesus.

In Luke we read that Gabriel "came to her" but we have no other information as to how that transpired. Did Gabriel suddenly appear, did he drop out of the skies, did he come waving his wings and stirring up a cloud of dust?

He was God's messenger, did he have a loud trumpet fanfare or did he approach with reserve, quietly so as to soften the shock?

In the Bible, most angels seem to have looked human when they appeared. Is it possible that Gabriel looked a lot like every other man in Nazareth or did he indeed appear as a holy and triumphant messenger in heavenly splendor?

We simply do not know.

What we do know is the setting is the most unlikely of places. Nazareth --- where nothing good can come from --- (at least it was thought of that way at the time).

Such an occurrence would be enough to frighten anyone but this young woman believed to be somewhere between 12 and 15 years of age asks the logical question --- How can that be, I'm still a virgin ---? After Gabriel's assurances that the Holy Spirit will come upon her, she is totally obedient --- "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" ---. One has difficulty imagining what emotions would have raced through her, what inner turmoil she might have felt.

The Annunciation is an event of such magnitude that for more than two millenia artists have tried to interpret the event and the art is as diverse as it is spectacularly beautiful. Many depict Gabriel as a human figure with huge wings clothed in flowing robes. Others such as Jon van Dyke dress Gabriel up to look like a 12th century pope. Some artists show Mary at a well drawing water when Gabriel approaches. Our Eastern Orthodox brothers and sisters believe that was the site of The Annunciation and they have erected the Church of St. Gabriel over the site. While not truly accepting that as fact, in an unusual statement of ecumenism The Roman Catholic Church designates St. Gabriel's as a "minor Basilica".

I love religious art and especially art of The Annunciation. It is arguably only second to the crucifixion in sheer quantity produced. The common theme is a frightened yet somehow calm Mary, the angel Gabriel and almost always a dove representing The Holy Spirit. Many of the inspired artists have been able to capture the dove in a white so brilliant in contrast that you believe it is somehow illuminated with a focused light beam.

The art is unusually varied but I love that because I'll be able to spend the rest of my life discovering new and exciting concepts about this miraculous event.

What strikes me most, though, in the story of The Annunciation is the calmness and complete obedience with which Mary accepts the responsibility. Think about that for a moment. This young woman accepts God's will for her, she says yes to this amazing idea that God the Son would be born into the world and she would be his mother! And, as amazing as that sounds, add the fact that the consequences of her acceptance would almost certainly have included stoning. Faced with a truly incredulous proposition accompanied by the virtual certainty of the most severe physical punishment, she accepts in full and complete obedience.

The easiest thing for her to do would have been to run away either literally or emotionally but she stands fast, "Here am I". This is one of the most profound scriptural statements about holding the course when things get rough, standing with God even in the face of great fear and uncertainty.

What Mary has recognized through her obedience is that we are not our own, ultimately we are God's. From that day to this, both heaven and earth were changed.

Mary allows herself to submit to God's will, becoming God's servant - true conversion of life - . How open are we to true and ongoing conversion of our lives? Can we truly say those words God so longs to hear; "let it be with me according to your word?" or do we add a mental list of caveats and exceptions? Do we start out truly wanting to accept God's desires for us and later, when the going gets tough, do we falter? We probably do.

So, what are you going to do when your angel comes?

God's call to us is usually more subtle than an Angel suddenly appearing or dropping through our living room ceilings.

I suppose an angel could arrive with great fanfare but I think it more likely that God will call us through the angels of everyday life.

We must remain especially vigilant and always be on the lookout for God's angels. Is it the homeless woman with 4 children, living in an abandoned car, who tells us she is blessed? Is she our angel? Could be.

Is it the teenage girl forced into sexual slavery at the corner of Peachtree and Pharr Roads in Buckhead who looks at us with painful eyes that beg; please don't let this happen to anyone else. Is she our angel? Could Be.

Is it a friend who cares deeply enough about you to tell you when you are headed down the wrong path? Is that your angel. Could be.

Is it the nurse in a hospice who shows us how to serve with love and grace in the face of death? Is that your angel? Could be.

If we truly want to be obedient to God's call and reflect the obedience shown by Mary then we must start by being open to that call, acknowledging that call and, whether we like what we hear or not, saying simply, "Here am I; let it be with me according to your word".

Amen

Comments? Contact Ed Fuller at: efuller@stphilipscathedral.org