

Annunciation – Teresa Holden

Isaiah 7:10-14; Psalms 40:5-10; Hebrews 10:4-10; Luke 1:26-38

Today, March 25, is Annunciation Day. Annunciation means “the act of announcing.” This day is exactly nine months before Christmas day, and it commemorates the day on which the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and announced to her that she was going to become a mother. Our Scriptures for today all reflect on this event and its broader meaning to the Jewish people and to the Christian church. Through them we can see, threaded through history, God’s underlying intent for His people, including us, and that is for us to experience Him as Immanuel, a word that means, “God with us.” Further, through these Scriptures we see demonstrated two different ways of receiving the message of “God with us” through the examples of King Ahaz and Mary.

The idea of understanding ourselves better through looking into the past reminds me of a TV show that you may have seen entitled, “Who Do You Think You Are?” In each episode, a celebrity is led through the process of delving into his or her family history, making use of professional genealogists and historians. In most episodes the featured celebrity finds something in their family’s past that affirms some deeply precious aspect of their own identity. The featured guests learn things about their families that help them to understand themselves better. One example is Vanessa Williams, who described her family as deeply devoted to education. Both of her parents were music teachers. Through the process of researching her father’s family lineage, she learned about the fact that, unbeknownst to her or her family, a grandfather, many generations back, during Reconstruction, had been elected, as one of the first African Americans, to his state legislature. In this role, he had introduced the first legislation that provided public education for African American children in that state. For Vanessa Williams this was a stunning affirmation of her own most deeply held values, and she understood herself and her family in a new way. Similarly, today’s Scriptures reveal the history of our faith and affirm our most deeply held belief in Jesus, who from the beginning of time and throughout our own lives has steadily, consistently been Immanuel, God-with-us.

Jesus begins in the human imagination in our Isaiah passage in which the prophet comes to advise Ahaz, the King of Judah, about his chances against the approaching armies of his enemies. These enemies are a dangerous threat, and God has given Isaiah important words for Ahaz about them. In the verses that precede our Scripture reading, God is quite blunt about the power of the approaching armies, telling Ahaz: “Be careful, keep calm and don’t be afraid.” Further God tells Ahaz to not listen to the “smack talk” of his enemies because, “It [their threats] will not take place, it will not happen.”

Despite God’s encouragement, Ahaz demonstrates that he has no interest in what God has to say to him because even when God invites him to ask for a sign to test God’s faithfulness, Ahaz

balks. His mind is already made up about the strategy he is going to choose, and it's set in a direction that's different from what God is telling him to do. He doesn't want any signs from God that will cast doubt on his decisions.

Ahaz is a lost cause, but God through Isaiah takes this moment to announce the Divine entrance into the world in human form, through a child born of a virgin. At the moment Isaiah makes this announcement, this information goes way over the head of Ahaz. It seems like he isn't even listening. From the start, listening to God would have required Ahaz to follow a much riskier plan of leadership, as God was directing Him to not back down to His enemies. In that case, he would have needed to believe wholeheartedly God's words to him, and he would have needed to take steps of faith, even though others may not have been able to understand. Instead King Ahaz developed an alliance with Assyria by promising to pay tribute to this cunning partner, who quickly took the upper-hand and reduced the people of Judah to permanent peonage, a condition that was very similar to slavery. The actions of Ahaz in contradiction to God would lead in time to the destruction of Judah and the fall of Israel. The promise of "God-With-Us" fell on deaf ears. However, Isaiah's words are the beginning of our heritage, they hold precious meaning, because they are the foretelling, so long ago, of the One who gives us all life and love and hope. At that moment the thread of our history began to weave its way through time.

About 700 years after this event, the angel, Gabriel, appeared to Mary, and said some fairly astounding things to her, things that she found to be initially troubling, and things that would change her life forever. Luke says that Mary was "greatly troubled" as soon as Gabriel greeted her with the words, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." Her suspiciousness is evidence that she was a prudent person, someone who wasn't gullible. In fact, Luke records that Mary thought – "what kind of a greeting is that?" Similar to the plan laid out to Ahaz, the plan God had for Mary (that Gabriel shared with her) was incredibly risky. She could potentially be rejected by her fiancé or her family, or both, for agreeing to this plan. Her whole world could crumble, and this was simply looking at the issue from a short-term point of view. For the long-term, she would suffer childbirth, care for an infant and child and forever be a parent of a child who would not be her husband's son, with all of the accompanying concerns and challenges. But as Gabriel keeps sharing information with her, Mary continues to interact with him. She doesn't reject him outright (as Ahaz had done), rather she asks questions, and Gabriel answers. Ultimately, Gabriel offers a sign that, in fact, what he has been sharing is true. He references Mary's relative, Elizabeth, as an example of someone else whose pregnancy seemed impossible, yet God had intervened allowing her to become pregnant at an advanced age. Maybe Gabriel's last sentence to her resonates with her. He says, "For no word from God will ever fail." (This is fairly similar to the kind of assurances God had given Ahaz.) Over the course of their conversation, Mary becomes convinced that Gabriel is giving her an authentic message from God, and her response reflects her faith. She says, "I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled."

Let me interrupt myself here to explain that historians (like me) generally don't believe that any human event is inevitable. Rather, most historians agree that at any given moment the choices of humans have a bearing on historical outcomes. (This is actually a very Wesleyan approach, because Wesleyans deny most claims of predestination.) Of course, most historians are approaching history from a mostly secular point of view, also not taking into consideration the hand of God in historic events. Momentarily though, let's think about these events of today's Scriptures from the perspective that neither of the outcomes was inevitable.

Doing this, we see hints that things could have happened much differently than they did. In Isaiah, we see that when Ahaz takes his stubborn stance in which he seems to completely turn away from God, he gets a rise out of Isaiah, who says to him: "Hear now, is it not enough to try the patience of humans? Will you try the patience of my God also? Therefore [so, because of that] the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel." So the promise of the Christ comes after Ahaz has rejected God's plan. This suggests that maybe there was a Plan A, but because of Ahaz's choices, it didn't occur. Who knows? Maybe if Ahaz had followed God's plan, the Christ would have come into the world in a different way, perhaps at an earlier time. Perhaps the poor choices of Ahaz led the Middle Eastern world into a whole series of upsets that temporarily changed the plan, but didn't necessarily have to happen. This would be just like Adam and Eve who in the Garden of Eden chose sin over paradise, leaving the world to live with the consequences of their choice.

In the story of Mary we see that she made a definite and deliberate choice to follow God, and only after she agrees to God's plan, is it executed. Gabriel is there to convince her, but perhaps she could have set her mind against God. Her obedience truly changes the course of history, but in positive ways. Her decision causes our own historical thread to take a positive leap forward.

What insight can we gain from the revealing of our history? I take three things from these stories of our heritage. First, we as believers belong to a long lineage of people who have been challenged to vanquish doubt and believe in God's plan. If we can overcome the overwhelming impulse to doubt that brought Ahaz down, and instead rise to the challenge to believe like Mary, we will be more fully capable of experiencing Immanuel, God-with-us. Second, these Scriptures reveal an imperative to be open to God's plan, the whispering voice of the Divine in the circumstances of our lives. We find God's plan as we pursue the disciplines of the faith – prayer, Scripture reading, our life in community. Through our pursuit of God, we gain hints about the direction we are to go and the ways in which God wants us to grow and change. Third, we must each believe in the journey God unravels in front of us, different as it may be from anyone else's. We may not always understand it, but we must take encouragement from the words of Gabriel: "No word from God will ever fail" and say like Mary, "I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled."