

Annunciate & Magnify

Luke 1:26-55

When the good news comes it always arrives with an announcement. In the beginning, when all is darkness and storm, order erupts from God's announcement: "*Let there be light*" (Gen. 1). When ancient Abraham and barren Sarah have long given up on God's promise of a future generation they host three strangers, angels with an odd announcement: "*When we return you will have a son*" (Gen. 18). Sarah laughs at such folly. When Israel has been judged and found hopeless, an exiled and broken people, the first sign of newness is Isaiah's poetic voice: "*Comfort ye, comfort ye my people*" (Is. 40). The good news arrives in the form of an announcement before there is any evidence of newness. The announcement is the evidence.

Luke's gospel begins with an announcement. Not just any announcement but "the" announcement - The Annunciation. This is, once again, the beginning of good news. Not just any good news but "the" good news, The Gospel. This is the good news that the other good news has been pointing towards. It is the fulfilment of God's promise. It is the reason that the Feast of the Annunciation - celebrated on March 25, nine months before the birth of the promised child - was long celebrated as New Year's Day. Can you feel another Christian Seasons Calendar in the making? The announcement marks the beginning. The new era of good news begins with the angel's announcement.

The angel arrives incognito. No wings. No halo. Just a stranger at the door who says to Mary: "*Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you*". Mary is "*much perplexed by his words*". What sort of a greeting is this? Favoured, here in this backwater village in this backwater region? The Lord - Yahweh - is with me? Perhaps she is, like us, more accustomed to hearing "*The Lord be with you*", to which she would have known to reply "*And also with you*". That is a prayer that says we need the presence of the Lord. But apparently the Lord is already with Mary. Really? The angel Gabriel makes the most audacious claim. Mary has found favour with God and will bear a son and 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 asks the obvious question: "*How can this be, since I am a virgin?*" It will be a Holy Spirit conception, says Gabriel: "*The Holy Spirit will come upon you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God*". Barren Elizabeth, in her old age, has conceived a son and is now six months pregnant. "*Nothing*", says the angel, "*will be impossible with God*".

Luke doesn't wait. He doesn't wait until the final chapter to put God's power on the line. You know that chapter - the one where Jesus' crucified body is raised from the dead? Talk about nothing being impossible for God! Here we are in chapter one, the orchestra has barely finished playing the overture and we have just settled into our seats when Luke confronts us with the impossible. In this story, he says, nothing will be impossible with God. Except that as good children of the Enlightenment we know that a virgin birth really is impossible. Impossible even for God. I have learned that 'in the air' of my liberal Protestant upbringing. It is, so I learned, not necessary to believe in the virgin birth to be a Christian, or even to be a minister. That is one of the strengths of being in the United Church. Or so many argue. I have not been so sure. I have been uncomfortable with writing off this miracle as impossible, given that the resurrection is just as - or perhaps even more - impossible. I have been more

willing to assume that my struggle to trust in the virgin birth is more my problem than God's problem. Perhaps I happen to live in a time and a place when it is particularly difficult for us to place our trust in God's power to enter our story with impossibly good news.

But this year something has changed. I am not sure that I can say that I know that there was a virgin birth. But, then, that wouldn't be faith, would it? This year I can say that I believe in the virgin birth. I believe in it because I know what its like to try to start from nothing all over again. That's the idea of a stem cell transplant. In a stem cell transplant all of the cells that are responsible for making your blood are erased. Then new stem cells are introduced into your blood stream and you begin all over again. Except that in my case the new cells were my own. It is called an "autologous" transplant. Autologous is made up of two Greek words - "auto" - self - and "logos" - word. It means to give yourself the word, the energy, the life. It means "self-starting". The interesting thing about an autologous transplant is that, while it is effective for awhile, it cannot provide a cure. Eventually the attempt to self-start will end up back where it began, with the cancer cells taking over. The only possibility for a cure with a stem cell transplant is to receive stem cells from someone else, from outside the closed system of your own body. Alas, while this works for some with leukemia it is not effective for people with multiple myeloma.

Did you notice what I have noticed? Auto-logos. Logos. Word. This is how the Gospel of John begins its description of the nativity: *"In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (Jn 1)*. The birth of the Messiah is a cosmic stem cell transplant. It is not an autologous transplant. It is not a story of the human race deciding to start all over again and do it right this time. The angel Gabriel brings big news to Mary - you are to be the bearer of the One who is God's cure to the cancer called Sin. And the cure can only come from outside the sick system. It must be a virgin birth or there cannot be a cure.

This is what it means to join in the Apostles' Creed and to say *"I believe in Jesus Christ ... conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary"*. It means I believe that God is curing the creation. It means I am not placing all of my faith in the capacity of human beings. Faith in the virgin birth is a clenched fist held up in the face of those who say that reconciliation in the family or between the races is impossible or that overcoming poverty is a problem that can be solved or that addictions will never be healed. This is the reason that Mary says *"Here am I, the servant of the Lord: let it be with me according to your word."* She says 'yes' to participating in the cure. She says 'yes' to God's intervention in her life. Now the angel can depart. The message has been received and accepted. The story can continue. The cure can be given.

Mary is blessed. That is what her cousin Elizabeth tells her: *"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb"*. Mary and her child are blessed because they are the location of God's intervention. This is not simply the beginning of some new teaching - though it is that. This is the beginning of some new power, power to heal and to liberate, to save and to redeem broken, hopeless people. It is hard to believe. That is why Elizabeth continues piling up the blessings, saying: *"And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."* Mary believes that God will deliver, that there will be impossible news and that she is somehow caught up in it. This is why she is traditionally known as the first disciple. Long before Peter and James and John leave their nets to follow Jesus, Mary leaves the shoreline behind her and trusts God with her future. She somehow finds it possible to say 'yes' when the only evidence that she has to go on is an announcement, a sermon, a message. Just words. Her faith is a miracle. Your faith is a miracle. The capacity to trust God's message, to say 'yes' to the announcement that good news is on the horizon, is a gift of the Holy Spirit. It is not based on the evidence. It is not a natural, in-born human trait. Faith that God is entering our world, your life, from outside to cure and to make new - this faith is conceived of the Holy Spirit. Somehow it takes everything

we have to say 'yes' to God's promise. And yet even though it takes all of our capacity to trust, in the end even our saying 'yes' is God's handiwork. Elizabeth calls it God's blessing.

Then Mary sings. She sings the first carol. Luke's narrative of the birth is filled with singing. Mary sings. Zechariah sings. The heavenly host sing. But Mary's song is still the most famous of all. You might not know it among us. We don't know all the words. We don't gather every evening for evensong. But those who have met every night for evening prayers always sing the Magnificat, Mary's song: "*My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour*". Mary magnifies - makes great - the Lord. Her song is a song of magnification. She has heard that she bears the One who is our future hope. She has not yet felt him kicking in her womb. He is a tiny fetus still. But she trusts that he is no less a reality. She trusts that God's power, though unseen, is huge. She magnifies God. In an age when the power of God is minimized Mary teaches the church to magnify the power of God. Perhaps that is the reason that this song is sung every night at evensong. Perhaps every age needs to magnify God's power in order to believe.

Notice what Mary teaches us to sing. She does not sing about what God will surely do one day. She sings of what God has already done long before it is accomplished. For her the future kingdom come where God's will is done is already here: The Lord "*has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly*". This, sings Mary, is the real world. This is the world to align your life with, to set your bearings by, to know is coming to pass. This is the world to live towards in your soul, your family, your neighbourhood, your politics. Nothing will be impossible with God. Mary trusts the news even before she feels the baby kicking. And she teaches us to sing her song.

- Edwin Searcy