

LIVING BY The Word

Sunday, December 21

Luke 1:26-38, 47-55

THE ANNUNCIATION HAS attracted the attention of commentators for centuries. Medieval writers liked to embroider upon Luke's bare-bones account, saying, for example, that when the angel Gabriel appeared, Mary was reading Isaiah 7, the prophet's foretelling of the birth of Christ. Visual artists were also attracted to the scene. Many paintings show Mary interrupted not from reading but from spinning, and legend has it that she was spinning Jesus' shroud: somehow, intuitively, she knew to prepare for his death before she even knew about his birth.

For me, the annunciation is one of the most challenging passages of scripture—not because I don't know exactly how to think about angels (I don't) or the virgin birth (ditto), but because the passage seems to suggest that to live the life of faith we must let God interrupt us. Whether Mary was reading or spinning or planning her wedding, the annunciation came as an interruption in a life that had been proceeding according to plan.

Mary's interruption, significantly, was a child—and *child*, of course, is synonymous with *interruption*. (I marvel at our culture's trend of trying to time pregnancies so that they don't radically interrupt our routines. My friend Louise was determined to give birth in a two-week window between semesters, and she hit it spot on. But, children being who they are, birth would be the last thing she could plan so precisely for the next 18 years.) These good tidings Gabriel brings are tidings of a lifetime of interruptions.

Mary responds to the news of this interruption with a line that is repeated in the church as a prayer, a prayer known by its Latin name, the *Fiat mihi*: "Let it be to me according to your will." Because of this response—which happens to be the first of five prayers that Luke scattered through the opening two chapters of his Gospel—many people have taken Mary to be a model of the Christian life. She was someone who heard God's word and submitted to it. She noticed that she was being interrupted, she recognized that the interruption came from God, and she embraced it.

I have often wondered what I would have said in Mary's shoes. Would I have said "Fiat mihi"? I doubt it. I think I would probably say, "Excuse me?" or "Um, thank you, but I'd really rather not." The fact is, I'm not especially interested in being interrupted by God. God's plans seem rarely to coincide with my own (and as an off-the-charts J on the Myers-Briggs, I have a lot of very carefully worked-out plans).

Actually, I'm better at grand, earthquake interruptions—dramatic interruptions that require moving, changing jobs, radically redirecting life plans—than I am at smaller, more quotidian interruptions. It's the smaller interruptions—say, the knock of an unannounced visitor on my office door—that really irk me. When I hear that unexpected knock, I turn my face into a smile and try not to communicate to my visitors that I was in the middle of a really crucial sentence and would they please leave and close the door behind them? It was easier for me to take a year's leave of absence from graduate school to move to Virginia and help care for my dying mother than it is to cope with an unexpected visitor who interrupts my perfectly planned afternoon.

This is where I'm supposed to tell you a story about the day a tearful student came to my door, and because I resisted the temptation to tell her to get lost, because I was willing to be interrupted, we had a profound encounter that changed both our lives for the better, forever. Did I mention that the student's name was Gabriella?

That's actually happened a few times. But more consistently, interruptions lead to something a bit less dramatic. They lead to uncomfortable glimmers of self-awareness; they show me to be a prideful control freak who dares to think that whatever I've got on tap for the day is supremely important and who dares to think that I own my own precious time. They are interruptions that, when I let them, foster a little humility. And it is that hard-to-swallow fruit of humility that allows me to sometimes recognize these interruptions as God's way of gradually schooling me in the grand imperatives of letting go of all I cling to and following Christ.

The lectionary also gives us the choice of reading the Magnificat (the second of five prayers found in the opening chapters of Luke). In the Magnificat, Mary praises God for another kind of interruption. She proclaims that God's bringing about new life in us is intimately, inseparably linked to God's disestablishing the proud and establishing *himself*. God lifts up the humble and knocks down the powerful; God fills up the hungry and sends away the rich, empty. The Magnificat is a prayer about God's revolution interrupting not only our tidy, ordered lives but our whole social order. It is a prayer that allows us to see the way that God's reversals and interruptions are already at work in the world and invites us to participate in them.

When we speak of the source of our salvation, we usually say something like "the cross" or "Jesus Christ." Perhaps, this week, we may name the means of our salvation slightly differently: we are saved by Mary's willingness to be interrupted. And the next time someone wishes us a Merry Christmas, perhaps we can hear in that wish a question: Are you, like Mary, willing to be interrupted by God?

Reflections on the lectionary



Sunday, December 28

Luke 2:22-40

LUKE 1 AND 2 are often described as “the Lukan infancy and childhood narratives”—the stories of Jesus’ birth and early childhood. That description is fine, but as Eugene Peterson has suggested, there is another way of framing the opening of Luke: these two chapters are a primer in prayer. Prayers saturate the first two chapters of Luke. Practically the entire story of Jesus’ birth is told in prayers—in the *Fiat mihi* (“Let it be to me according to your will”), Mary announces her acceptance of God’s will; in the Magnificat (“My soul glorifies the Lord”), she praises God for turning things upside down and inside out.

The next prayer is spoken by Zechariah, the husband of Mary’s cousin, Elizabeth. He has been struck mute for months. On the day that his son John is named and circumcised, Zechariah finally gets his speech back. In that situation, my first words might be curses. But Zechariah’s first words are words of prayer: “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people.” Then comes a prayer that is very familiar to us at Christmas time—the Gloria: in the wake of Jesus’ birth, a chorus of angels sings “Glory to God in the highest, and peace to his people on earth.” Today, we repeat that prayer, which praises God and declares God’s will for peace.

Finally, in verses 29-32 of Luke 2, we get the prayer now known as the *Nunc Dimittis*:

Lord, you now have set your servant free
to go in peace as you have promised;
For these eyes of mine have seen the Savior,
whom you have prepared for all the world to see:
A light to enlighten the nations,
and the glory of your people Israel.

Praying this prayer at bedtime as we sometimes do, we risk domesticating what is really a quite remarkable and unsettling scene. It is unsettling not only because Simeon is announcing his readiness to die. He is also alerting Mary to Jesus’ death: “A sword will pierce your own soul too.” Here he is predicting her suffering, and, by extension, he is suggesting Jesus’ suffering, since it is the piercing of Jesus’ side that will pierce her. Simeon’s opaque and poetic line, in other words, is a subtle instruction to remember the cross.

Remember the cross at Christmas? Aren’t we supposed to think about the cross on Good Friday, and the manger, homely and sweet, today? Actually, remembering the cross is part of the adult version of Christmas. Let’s face it; Christmas is a time of great happiness, but it is also, for many of us, a time of great struggle. At Christmastime, some of us count up all the people we loved who have died, and we yearn for them. Some of us feel hideously lonely, and our loneliness seems all the more glaring because it’s out of sync with the script of seasonal happiness we think we’re supposed to be following. We are not alone in this suffering. Mary, our text hints, was suffering on Jesus’ behalf, in anticipation of Jesus’ later suffering.

Simeon’s reminder of Jesus’ suffering and our suffering brings us back to prayer. We are called into a life in which God, in response to our suffering, breaks into the world, and that in-breaking is accompanied by God’s own suffering (and the suffering of God’s mother, Mary). We heed Jesus’ call into a suffering life by prayer. Prayer, after all, is the place where we

Prayer is how we participate in God’s in-breaking.

enter into one another’s suffering, and where God draws near to our suffering. It is also the place where we participate in God’s comfort and in God’s redemption of our suffering—and this baby Jesus does not conquer the powerful with the sword, but by living a life of suffering and prayer, and by dying.

Over and over throughout the first two chapters of Luke, God’s faithful people respond to God by praying. I take two larger insights about prayer from these praying faithful. First, prayer is the channel through which we participate in God’s breaking into the world. Second, prayer is not a hard task that we have to initiate. Rather, our prayer, like the prayers of Mary, Zechariah, the angelic choir and Simeon, is a response to the work that God is already doing. This is part of the good news of the *Nunc Dimittis*—God enters into our lives not just by being born 2,000 years ago, but by constituting a community of praying people that includes an unmarried teenage girl who is pregnant and an elderly man who is on his last legs. And just as that teenage girl and that old man enter God’s story through proclamations of faithfulness and praise, so too God enters our lives by inviting us to enter into God’s life through prayer.

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