



"Bearing God's Love"

Scripture – Luke 1:26-38

Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson

Sunday, December 24, 2023, 10 a.m.

The Annunciation, as Christians call this passage from Luke, may have inspired more artists than almost any other scene from Scripture. In many classical interpretations, Gabriel and Mary bow before one another in mutual reverence. In some, the angel hovers above the young woman, who appears at times surprised, at times expectant, but *always* appropriately demure. More contemporary works direct the viewers' gaze toward *Mary*, inviting us to consider the range of emotions this unwed teenager must have felt upon hearing the angel's words. But one image I stumbled upon recently captured my imagination because of the way it portrayed *the messenger*.

In this watercolor, Nigerian artist Paul Woelfel depicts the angel kneeling before Mary.¹ He is holding a sealed envelope, which contains a message so holy that he won't touch it with his bare hands. But the detail I find most intriguing is this: Gabriel has removed his sandals. His shoes lie abandoned in the foreground. As if God gave Gabriel the same instruction that the Almighty gave Moses when calling from a burning bush: *Take off your sandals, for you are standing on holy ground*. Paul Woelfel's Gabriel knows the sacredness of this moment. He knows that he is kneeling in the presence of one who is highly favored, of one who is deeply faithful. So, in respectful obedience, he removes his sandals before delivering a message that will change the world, before witnessing a response that will change the world.

In the very next scene of Luke's Gospel, Elizabeth calls Mary "blessed among women." And, throughout history, the church has called her "Mary, full of grace." It is easy to assume that she is blessed because she is *favored*, that she is full of grace because God has bestowed grace upon her. But I don't think Mary is worthy of honor *simply* because the Holy One selected her to bear the Savior of the world. She's not blessed and full of grace because *God* chose to partner with *Mary*. She is blessed because *Mary* chose to partner with *God*.

¹ Paul Woelfel, "Annunciation," [Annunciation - Art \(brewer-com.com\)](https://www.brewer-com.com)

Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.

It is a response that evokes the Call Stories of Scripture. In saying, “Here I am, the servant of the Lord” Mary echoes heroes of the faith — Moses and Samuel and Isaiah. In saying, “Let it be with me according to your word,” she models faithfulness for her son — the one who will so faithfully follow God’s mission of justice and love that he will confront the cruelty of the cross, saying: *not my will but yours be done* (Lk 22:42). Mary responds to God’s call with deep trust and abiding hope, and — in doing so — she becomes more than the Mother of Jesus. She becomes Luke’s model disciple.

On this, the fourth Sunday of Advent, it is right to pause and honor Mary — something we Protestants so rarely do. It is right to remember her faith and faithfulness. Perhaps, like Gabriel, we even take off our shoes, acknowledging that we are in the presence of the one who bore to the world God’s greatest gift of love. Yet there is a difference between kneeling before one through whom God has done holy work and putting Mary on a pedestal. There is a difference between celebrating her response to God’s call and presuming we could never emulate such faith and faithfulness.

Lest we fall into this trap of viewing Mary as impossibly holy, let us remember the *whole* conversation between the angel of the Lord and the favored of the Lord. Let us remember that — before Mary said, “Let it be ...”; before she sang, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior” — she asked questions. *Human* questions. She considered God’s call on her life. In fact, it took some convincing on the part of Gabriel to get to what poet Jan Richardson calls Mary’s “radiant consent, her beautiful and awful yes.”²

When Gabriel first appears to Mary, the young woman is “greatly troubled.” Your pew Bible softens this language, suggesting Mary was merely “perplexed.” But the original text makes clear that Mary was not at all glad to see an angel show up on her doorstep. And no wonder — God’s messengers always bring life-altering news.

In this case, the life-altering news is that God has chosen Mary — an unwed teenager from an unremarkable town — to bear history’s most remarkable child. In just three verses, Gabriel makes seven grand pronouncements about who this child will be: He will be called Jesus — meaning, “One who saves”; he will be the Son of God; he will rule in the line of his ancestor, David. All these statements add up to one amazing promise: that Mary will bear the Messiah for whom her people have waited. This long-anticipated advent would have delighted most people. For many, it would have elicited a song of joy like the one Mary *eventually* sings. But she’s not there yet. She’s not quite ready to proclaim, “My soul cries out with a joyful shout!” She still has questions about God’s grand plan: “How can this be?” she asks the angel.

Gabriel explains to Mary that the Holy Spirit will rest upon her, that the child to be born will be holy and that *she* will be participating in holy work. His explanation may have offered some clarity. But it seems Mary still needs reassurance. So, Gabriel shares some news: *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. For nothing*

² Jan Richardson, “Gabriel’s Annunciation,” » [Advent 4: Gabriel and Mary The Advent Door](#)

is impossible with God. Only then does Mary say, “Yes.” Only then does she respond to God’s call with, “Let it be with me according to your word.”

It’s possible that Mary needed to hear news of another miracle. It’s possible she needed proof that nothing is, in fact, impossible with God. But I think the thing that finally convinced Mary to accept God’s plan was the assurance that she would not be alone — that she would have a companion on this uncertain journey. After all — as soon as the angel departs from her — Mary takes off; she runs almost 100 miles to the hill country of Judea to visit Elizabeth, to be in the company of another ordinary woman through whom God is doing extraordinary things. Yes, I think the thing that finally gives Mary the courage to act with faith and faithfulness is the knowledge that she would find support in the embrace of community ... that others were also participating in the promises of God.

Mary-Full-of-Grace had the particular calling of mothering Jesus — of carrying the Word-made-Flesh within her womb and bearing Love Incarnate to the world. On this, the fourth Sunday of Advent, we rejoice that Mary said, “yes” to partnering with God in this way. But we also recognize that this work was not *hers* alone, nor was it a calling that was completed on a silent night in Bethlehem. The church is *still* called to do what Mary did — namely, to usher into the world the light and love of Christ. And we can emulate Mary’s faith and faithfulness because we know we are not alone in this work. Not only does the Holy Spirit rest upon us, too, but — like Mary — we are upheld by the support of community, by companions who also participate in the work of bearing God’s love to the world.

There is another image that has captured my imagination as I consider our collective calling to usher in Christ’s light and love. It’s one that comes *not* from an artist who was inspired by the stories of Scripture, but from a journalist who was inspired by the story of one Baltimore neighborhood.³ As far as I know, this community was not acting out of religious conviction, though — for some — I’m sure faith informed their choice to participate. But this neighborhood’s act of love serves as a reminder of the importance of community’s embrace, and of the power of a community’s witness.

A few years ago, during the height of the pandemic, a man named Matt decided to string a single strand of Christmas lights from his home to the house across the street. Matt knew his neighbor was facing a dark time; she had shared that she was dealing with depression and anxiety and was also grieving the loss of a loved one. So, he strung Christmas lights connecting their homes to remind his neighbor that — despite the isolation of the pandemic — she was not alone.

Well, that small act of love sparked a neighborhood-wide movement. Before long, there were strands of Christmas lights stretched across the road, connecting houses up and down the block. It was completely unplanned; this neighborhood display just grew out of everyone’s desire to bring light to their community. One neighbor even decided to include a message. She stayed up all night bending dry-cleaning coat hangers and wrapping cords around them so that the string of lights she hung across the road would spell the words: Love lives here.

³ Sydney Page, “A man strung Christmas lights from his home to his neighbor’s to support her. The whole community followed, *The Washington Post* (December 21, 2021).

The display didn't stop with the neighbors on Dunkirk Road. In the days that followed, residents living on nearby streets began stretching lights between their houses and those on opposite sides of the road. Soon, the whole community was illuminated; soon, this neighborhood became a beacon of light to a world that seemed shrouded in darkness. The collective display resonated so deeply that the neighbors decided to make it a tradition. The next year they had a party to hang their Christmas lights together. And they vowed to do so every year to come, pandemic or otherwise.

It is but one image of a community coming together to bring light and love. In the midst of deep darkness, the residents of this Baltimore neighborhood transformed their little corner of the world with a message of hope. And it is a reminder to all of us — especially those who will gather tonight to celebrate that the light shines in the darkness — how much this weary world needs assurances of God's love and grace. So, in this season and in all seasons, we labor alongside Mary. We find ways, large and small, to participate in God's holy work. We emulate her response of faith and faithfulness, trusting that we never do this work alone. And, with her courageous "Yes!" echoing on our lips, we join Mary in the work of ushering into the world the light and love of Christ.

Prayers of the People ~ Gregory Knox Jones

Weaver of the world and Spinner of the stars, we give you thanks for this special season when the world celebrates the birth of Jesus. As we near the night of celebration, our minds are flooded with memories of past Christmases. We remember the delight of gatherings with family and friends, the abundant tables of delicious food and drink, the excitement of sharing gifts, the uplifting moments in worship, and the singing of favorite carols that make our throats tighten and our lips quiver. May we recall those occasions when we felt especially close to loved ones and connected to you – when love and tenderness were palpable and we were aglow with your Spirit. We pray that this Christmas our souls will be saturated with wonder and delight.

Everlasting God, during these troubling times, we pray that Christ will come into our lives and those across the globe, again and again.

Immanuel, fill our hearts with compassion, not only for people like ourselves, but for all people of good will;

Bread of Life, kindle a spirit of generosity toward those without food and safe shelter;

Good Shepherd, foster empathy for those suffering illness or the loss of a loved one;

Wonderful Counselor, stir a desire to forgive those who have hurt us and the will to reconcile relationships needing repair;

Light of the World, revive a thirst for justice, so that all may be liberated, and treated with fairness and equity;

Prince of Peace, drench us with a passion for peace, so that the time, energy, and money that are devoted to violence and weapons of war may be redirected to food, housing, and healing. We pray especially for the people of Israel/Palestine where hostages are still being held and more than 20,000 people – mostly women and children – have been killed. We pray that the leaders and governments

and weapons manufacturers who thrive on death will be replaced by courageous leaders who understand that the only sane path to peace is justice for all.

Gracious God, as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus, open our hearts, open our minds, open our souls so that Christ may be born in us again and again, infusing us with love. Despite the darkness that surrounds us, despite the fractures in our relationships, despite the difficulties in our lives and the trouble in our souls, implant a spirit of joy within us so that we might lock arms with one another and become partners with you in transforming this world.

And now we unite our voices in the familiar and comforting prayer Jesus taught us, saying, **Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.**